



ВОЙНА ИГОРЯ БУНИЧА



БУНИЧ ИГОРЬ

ПИРАТЫ ФЮРЕНА

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PIRATES OF THE FUHRER

1. PREFACE

Germany spent both world wars under the most severe naval blockade. Her fleet had to fight with overwhelmingly superior enemy forces.

There has never been such an imbalance of power in the history of naval warfare.

During the First World War, the naval power of Great Britain, France, Italy, Japan and Russia, and later the United States, was turned against Germany.

In World War II, the unprecedentedly huge, global fleets of the United States and Great Britain, with the feasible assistance of the navies of their numerous allies in the anti-Hitler coalition, dominated all oceans, leaving the enemy little chance for small tactical successes that could not change the strategic situation.

Of course, there was the battle of Jutland, where three British battlecruisers took off under German fire. A quarter of a century later, under the fire of the Bismarck, the most famous English ship of that time, the battlecruiser Hood, perished; but the main, I would even say "romantic" memory was left in the history of naval wars by German surface raiders - typical corsairs and privateers, as if by magic transferred from the era of geographical discoveries and the great wars of privateers.

However, it was easier for the corsairs of those times. They did not have to think about coal, fuel oil, diesel fuel and engine oil, and also about the fact that they would be detected by enemy radars or aircraft. But if the old days know Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish and English pirates, then in the 20th century only German ships went to pirate raids.

As before, among the commanders were "noble pirates" like the captain of the 2nd rank Muller from the legendary cruiser Emden, who captured and destroyed 23 enemy ships without spilling a single drop of blood; there were also fierce ones - like the captain of the 1st rank Rukshel from the auxiliary cruiser Mikhel, who was convicted and died in an English prison.

Operating in the ocean, having no bases, no allies, no supplies, the raiders demonstrated miracles of courage and audacity, skillfully evading pursuit, disguising themselves and taking advantage of any opportunity to deliver quick and very painful blows to the enemy.

Winston Churchill, admiring their actions, called the raiders "beautiful, but, unfortunately, already cut flowers", referring to the fact that these ships are doomed. But it was not always so. Many "cut flowers" after many months of raids in the ocean managed to return to their native ports under the very nose of the British.

In both world wars, only German ships were engaged in corsairry. Cause

was that with the beginning of both the First and Second World Wars, German maritime trade practically ceased. The huge merchant fleet of Germany either settled in its ports, or was interned in neutral harbors, or was captured by the enemy. And the maritime trade of Great Britain or, say, the United States continued as if nothing had happened, as if there had been no war. It was on the maritime trade of their opponents that the German "corsairs" struck.

It is said that the German Navy simply had no other way to make itself known. Germany, by the way, was the only country in the world that used battleships to combat enemy shipping.

Back in World War I, the incredibly daring raid of the battlecruiser Goeben actually changed the whole world, crushing the Russian and Ottoman empires.

At the very beginning of World War II, the pocket battleship Admiral Graf Spee went into the ocean raid, followed by two other ships of the same type: Deutschland and Admiral Scheer. Then the battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau were thrown into the war with the shipping of the British. The mighty Bismarck, intercepted and sunk by the British in a dramatic naval battle, also rushed into the corsair raid.

The use of battleships in such operations was very expensive. That is why they did not set the tone in the corsair war.

In both wars, the main adventures and successes fell to light cruisers and auxiliary cruisers converted from merchant ships. The only exception is, perhaps, only the battleship Admiral Scheer.

Russia's attitude to the piracy activities of the German raiders in the two world wars was diametrically opposed.

If in the First World War Russia sent its cruisers to the ocean to help the Entente allies fight German corsairs (the Russian cruiser Zhemchug even died sunk by Emden, one of the most famous German raiders), then in World War II the Soviet Union made a significant contribution to the success of the combat activities of the "pirates of the Fuhrer".

Soviet icebreakers with the characteristic names "Lenin", "Stalin" and "Kaganovich", changing each other, led the German auxiliary cruiser "Komet" through the Northern Sea Route to the Pacific Ocean, deep in the rear of the British.

German raiders operating off the coast of Norway brought their "prizes" to Murmansk, where tankers, tankers and a hearty welcome were waiting for them. The scandal happened only once, when the pocket battleship "Deutschland" brought the captured American steamer "City of Flint" to Murmansk.

The ships of the Soviet Northern Fleet shared with the raiders information about the deployment of British ships. Even more cordial "intimacy" was going on in the Pacific Ocean. Replaceable crews of pirate ships were transferred along the Siberian railroad. In the same way, wounded and sick sailors from the raiders went to Germany.

The navigator of the most successful and merciless "corsair" "Atlantis" in a soft carriage of the international class of the Siberian express made a very pleasant journey through the entire Soviet Union, hurrying to deliver secret documents seized from the British to Berlin. The Chekists who accompanied Kamenets treated the pirate with caviar and cognac.

And in the Pacific Ocean, Soviet tankers bunkered pirate ships "in the name of

final victory of labor over capital.

The actions of the German raiders made a deep impression on Comrade Stalin himself, who repeatedly reproachfully asked Admiral Kuznetsov why Soviet ships could not do what the German raiders were doing.

Indeed, why?

And already after the war, the "great leader of all peoples" decided to build a huge raider armed with 305-mm artillery, giving the stunned specialists the following technical task: "It should be a "hooligan ship". It should be able to appear anywhere in the world's oceans and sink everything that is afloat.

The sudden death of the leader prevented the implementation of this "bold" idea.

Both world wars go into the foggy distance of history, taking with them countless facts and mysteries that risk remaining unknown and unrevealed.

Let's take into account the situation in which the Russian fleet found itself after the collapse of the USSR, and dare to say: no one will be hindered by the knowledge of how obviously the weakest fleet is able to act effectively against a much stronger enemy, regardless of the similarity or difference in ideologies.

But, frankly, when offering this book to the readers' judgment, we did not think much about such "high matters", but more counted on lovers of adventure literature, remembering that the most adventurous, romantic and exciting adventures have always happened and continue to happen at sea. We hope that our future reader will agree with us in this respect.

2. THROUGH THREE OCEANS - COMBAT AROUND THE WORLD OF AUXILIARY CRUISER "ATLANTIS"

I

Captain First Rank Bernhard Rogge, climbing the gangplank aboard the Hanseatic diesel-electric ship Golden Fels, grimaced in annoyance. The non-commissioned officer standing on watch at the gangway clicked his heels, took a stance "to attention" and even put his hand to the visor of his civilian cap, although Rogge strictly forbade the manifestation of any naval rituals on the vessel entrusted to him. But breaking people into the habits of years of service in the navy was not nearly as easy as Rogge had hoped.

The diesel-electric ship "Goldenfels" was a ship of the latest construction with a full load displacement of 17,600 tons (7862 gt), a length of 155 m, a width of 18.7 m and a draft in full load of 8.9 m. Two diesel engines operating on one shaft, provided the vessel with a speed of 16 knots and unprecedented autonomy.

"Goldenfels" was built by order of the Hansa company at the Vulkan plant in Bremen. Laid down in 1937 and completed in 1939, the Goldenfels, barely having time to enter service, was mobilized and remained at the plant for conversion into an auxiliary cruiser. Somewhere in the secret documents of the main naval headquarters, the ship had already been renamed, listed under the index "Raider No. 16".

It was supposed to install six 150-mm guns, one 75-mm, two 37-mm and four 20-mm anti-aircraft guns, as well as four 533-mm torpedo tubes. In addition, Raider No. 16 was supposed to carry 92 mines in the holds, and two seaplanes on deck. All this powerful weapons and carrier-based aircraft had to be carefully disguised from outside observers.

Actually, Rogge did this, leading the restructuring of the former Goldenfels into an auxiliary cruiser.

Rogge was a romantic seaman. Born in 1899 in Schleswig, at the age of sixteen, at the height of the First World War, he entered the Kaiser's fleet, sailed on light cruisers and participated in countless skirmishes with the enemy in Helgoland Bay. Rogge remained in the navy during the years of the Weimar Republic as a teacher of maritime practice at the naval school in Kiel.

In 1934, Rogge was already a captain of the third rank, and from 1936 to 1939 he commanded the GrohFock and Albert Leo Schlageter training sailboats, making numerous trips with future fleet officers in the North and Baltic Seas, as well as across the Atlantic Ocean up to to about. St. Helena. In these positions, which were considered elite, Rogge rose to the rank of captain of the first rank. Rogge was an ardent supporter of waging war against English shipping on the ocean. The history of the German fleet in the First World War in this regard gave many of the most striking examples for inspiration and imitation, not to mention the fact that this was so far the only way to wage a naval war against the British, whose gigantic fleet, dominating all the oceans, simply did not give the weak German fleet has no other chance, as in the last war. From the very beginning of World War II, Captain First Rank Rogge had the opportunity to put his plans into practice when he was appointed commander of Raider No. 16. Rogge got down to business with ardor. The only thing that did not suit him was the fact that his beautiful ship, capable of traveling 60,000 nautical miles at a speed of 10 knots without refueling, just has a number, as if she were just some kind of torpedo boat or submarine. And Rogge gave his ship the name "Atlantis", believing that this very name contains enough mysticism for the "Pandora's box" wandering along the waves, where guns, mines, torpedoes are hidden. Although the new war with England did not please Rogge at all, he was pleased with his new appointment, which gave him greater freedom of independent action away from his superiors, who almost every five minutes needed to ask permission for any of his next steps. His Atlantis was supposed to be the first commercial raider to enter the English shipping lanes in this war, and, of course, I wanted the ship to achieve no less results than the raiders of the last war, also rebuilt from Wolf commercial ships and sailboats, "Mewe" and "Seeadler".

At the Naval War Headquarters, Rogge was warned that not a drop of information should be leaked to the enemy, even about the very intention of Germany to send armed merchant ships into the ocean as commercial raiders. "Amazing!" - Rogge answered this warning and asked to explain why, then, above the entrance to one of the buildings of Bremen, there is a sign on which, for everyone who can read, it is written: Headquarters of armed commercial raiders. In Berlin, of course, no one knew anything about this, and Rogge was asked not to be clever.

No less witty was in the personnel department when Rogge applied for the 19 officers he needed on the Atlantis. "What? the personnel officers were surprised, "do you want to drown 19 officers at once?"

The bureaucratic "tape" at the sight of him was tied into Gordian knots. Even in order to get a sextant with an artificial horizon, I had to apply directly to the commander-in-chief. And when Rogge hinted at a modern fire control system, he received a categorical refusal, motivated by the fact that he would be sunk before he had time to use this system. And what were the daily security measures worth! One day, a crate being loaded onto the Atlantis opened and a whole bunch of tropical helmets spilled out onto the pier.

It seemed to Rogge that the officer responsible for the security of the preparatory stage of the operation would shoot himself right on the pier ...

The scope of work on the Atlantis was enormous, and there was very little time to convert a peaceful cargo ship into a warship, which in the future the British would call the "rattlesnake of the oceans".

Rogge sat in his cabin, trying to concentrate. With one hand he rubbed his square jaw, with the other he played with an elegant fountain pen. In front of him lay a map of the North Sea with outlets to the Atlantic. It was difficult to concentrate. Pneumatic hammers and sledgehammers thundered throughout the ship. The factory workers were constantly yelling at each other and swearing loudly. Most of them, involved in the work on the re-equipment of the Goldenfels, did not know what, in fact, they were doing. The target was hidden even from them - in the interests of security. Through the half-open porthole, Rogge heard the noise and chugging of a steam locomotive, the clatter of freight cars, the sound of wheels at the junction of rails laid along the pier of the outbuilding wall of the Vulkan plant, the clang of tower cranes, the horns of tugboats - painfully familiar sounds of the port and the shipyard.

Since the beginning of the war, which has recently turned six weeks old, many merchant ships have gathered in Bremen, which were unable to go to sea due to the British blockade. The same as in the last war. And the British themselves, dominating all the oceans, continued, as in peacetime, to use the sea routes for sailing the ships of their huge merchant fleet, which delivered millions of tons of the most important strategic cargo to Britain. Therefore, the main task of Atlantis was not so much to destroy British merchant ships as to bring disorganization into the entire system of English commercial shipping, forcing the British to disperse their warships throughout the world's oceans in order to save their precious maritime trade, on which all prosperity was based, from destruction. Great Britain and the outcome of its military efforts.

Our small planet is so small that everything on it is interconnected. Almost the same, even to a greater extent, can be said about naval warfare. Fighting in the Indian Ocean can directly affect the situation in the North Sea or in the Arctic. A successful attack off the coast of East Africa could lead to the movement of large enemy forces from the North Atlantic.

Each ship sunk within just a few hours can lead to a long delay in the ports of dozens of others, to a change in optimal routes, which, in turn, will lead to a disruption in the schedule for the arrival of the most important cargo, on which the fate of entire armies depends, whether in Libya or on Volga, although these armies probably do not suspect how much their fate depends on unknown merchant ships.

Of course, now that aviation has received such development, a raider in the ocean can no longer feel as at ease as in the last war. But one should not overestimate all the current dangers. "Of course, there is a risk, gentlemen," Rogge admitted, having another conversation with his officers. "But let me remind you that the ocean is endless, and that about a third of the time of every day darkness reigns over it." In preparation for the raid, Rogge, among other things, acquired an adjutant. They became the young lieutenant Ulrich Mohr, who, despite his youth, managed to visit the USA, Japan and China, knew several languages, graduated from the university and even acquired a degree.

Mort, who was drafted into the fleet at the start of the war, almost ended up on the minesweepers, but thanks to the patronage of his father, also a naval officer and an old friend of Rogge from an elite yacht club in Kiel, he got on the Atlantis, immediately plunging headlong into all the problems associated with the preparation of the ship for the raid. Right now, Lieutenant More was fighting the authorities, trying to get four rocket launchers on the Atlantis.

The battle had been going on for three days. The authorities could not understand why Atlantis needed rocket launchers. More explained that prize teams needed rocket launchers. "Well, you are optimists!" smiled the head clerks. Mor turned to the commander of the defense of the Baltic coast, to the chief naval commander in Bremen and directly to the Admiralty in Berlin. And everywhere I came across a stone wall of complete indifference. In the end, all four rocket launchers were received, but for this it was necessary to get through to Grand Admiral Raeder himself, the Commander-in-Chief of the Kriegsmarine. And so it has always been. Whatever Mor tried to get - forks, spoons, books for the ship's library (do you think that you will have time to read?) or paintings to decorate cabins and cockpits - everything had to be decided almost at the level of the commander-in-chief.

Rogge laughed. He understood the feelings that overwhelmed the authorities.

In the last war, one raider was preparing to leave for 18 months! Silver, crystal and paintings in a golden baguette were brought to it from the stocks of imperial yachts. But before the raider had time to go to sea, he was intercepted and sunk by an English cruiser. The Atlantis was the first auxiliary cruiser to go to the ocean, and many were sure that the same would happen to her.

II

Finally, on December 28, 1939, Atlantis left Bremen and headed for Kiel, where it was supposed to conduct final tests and take ammunition for the upcoming campaign.

But the beginning turned out to be quite bleak. The pilot who led the Atlantis along the Weser River into the North Sea managed to run the ship aground. Although it was as if Rogge was not to blame, since there was a pilot on board, everyone considered the grounding an ominous omen and became visibly depressed. Lieutenant Fehler, a demolition miner, was trying to get his colleagues out of depression. "Don't be upset! he encouraged the Atlantis officers. "On the contrary, it is an excellent omen. Recall that the "Wolf" also ran aground, going out to sea. But what results he achieved in the raid!

It was about the raider of the last war - the auxiliary cruiser "Wolf", which was also stranded by a pilot when going to sea, though not on the Weser, but on the Elbe. "Idiot," Atlantis's navigator Lieutenant Commander Kamenz told Fehler, his bald head crimson with rage. "Have you forgotten what happened to the commander of the Wolf?" Him immediately

fired from office."

It really was. Removing the commander of the "Wolf" from his post, the command motivated its decision by the fact that the commander of the raider must be not only an experienced professional, but also an equally successful sailor. Since he was not lucky right away, it is better to remove him from command. Let bad luck haunt him on the shore.

Everyone, of course, was afraid for Rogge. If such criteria were guided in 1914, what can we expect now, when the Führer compares his decisions with astrological forecasts? Rogge and his manner of command had become so accustomed to that a change in command was seen as a far worse omen than a grounding.

Six hours later the tide pulled the Atlantis afloat, but another week passed before it became clear that no one was going to attach any serious importance to this unfortunate incident. Rogge remained at his post.

On March 22, 1940, the Kriegsmarine floating base appeared on the Elbe - two-pipe, completely painted in ball color, with a military flag on the stern. Gun mounts were visible on the forecastle and poop of the mother ship. On March 24, a Norwegian dry cargo ship anchored at Suederpip. It was a single-tube steamer with a green hull and white superstructures. A yellow quarantine flag was hoisted from its mast. On April 9, an auxiliary ship of the Soviet fleet called the KIM entered the strait between Bergen and Shetland with a hammer and sickle on the bridge and with a red star on the cover of hatch No. 2. On the stern superstructure, in a language that the sailors of the Atlantis for some reason considered Russian, there was an inscription:

BEWAREWINTSW

Which was supposed to mean "Beware of the screws!"

True, this strange inscription was also duplicated in English, however, also not quite correctly, meaning, rather, a warning: "Stay away from our screws!"

On the Atlantis they laughed: perhaps the British will take our hint.

The crew of the raider learned how to quickly and effectively change the appearance of their ship - a German mother ship, a Norwegian bulk carrier, a Soviet auxiliary vessel. At any moment, Atlantis could change its appearance and become completely unrecognizable.

But this was not enough. It was necessary to be able to throw off a sheep's skin within a few seconds and show the fangs of a wolf: guns, torpedo tubes, heavy machine guns and mines. In the meantime, the "fangs" were hidden under three layers of "sheepskin".

The ship made its way north slowly, risking detection every minute. If the British caught him in the North Sea, then, regardless of the consequences of this event, raiding in the ocean would have to be forgotten. Perhaps it would have been possible to break through with a fight back to Germany, but nothing more ...

Rogge stood on the navigation bridge, scanning the horizon through binoculars. Lieutenant Mort was on deck, watching with interest as a sailor dressed in overalls wrote something with black paint on the lid of a large wooden box. With the help of a simple mechanism, the side walls of the box fell onto the deck, revealing a large-caliber machine gun ready for battle. The sailor looked at More and laughed.

"Everything is fair, isn't it, sir lieutenant?" It was written on the box with fresh paint: "Caution! Flimsy packaging." The usual warning when loading and unloading.

If someone studies Atlantis through binoculars, they will easily see and read this inscription. The false deck covered the 150-mm guns from being detected from the air, and the wooden shields from the side.

There was a general impression that there were containers with oversized cargo on the deck. Even looking from the wall to which the Atlantis was moored, it was hard to see anything suspicious. The counterweight system released the guns in two seconds, and after five seconds they could already open fire. The inscription on the containers was easy to read:

INDUSTRIAL MACHINES FOR THE PHILIPPINES

Thus, five of the six 150-mm guns were disguised, and the sixth was disguised as a cargo crane.

The catapult with the aircraft was camouflaged in such a way that from the side it looked like a large water tank. In other words, the sheep's skin of the wolf looked quite real.

On the initial, albeit rather short, segment of the journey - when breaking through from the North Sea into the ocean - Atlantis had to go through the three most dangerous sections: the so-called Frisian minefield, a narrow passage between the coasts of Norway and Britain, and then the Danish Strait, which is entrance to the North Atlantic.

This strait, which looks very wide on the map, is in fact a narrow, fog-shrouded passage in the pack ice of Greenland and Iceland.

At the borders of the minefield, English submarines usually sat in ambush.

The narrow passage between the British Isles and Norway was constantly patrolled by English ships.

In the Danish Strait, auxiliary cruisers of the enemy carried around the clock, and the entire area was constantly monitored from the air by British reconnaissance aircraft.

Disguise as a Soviet ship was not chosen by chance. Nowhere was secrecy more loved than in the Soviet Union, and therefore few knew, including in England, what auxiliary vessels were part of the Soviet fleet. In addition, the British could not follow the Soviet ports, as they followed the German ones, and know exactly who and when these left the ports. And, finally, tense relations between the USSR and England served as a guarantee that the British would refrain from any sudden movements at the sight of a Soviet ship.

The weather began to deteriorate. The wind picked up, and darkness hung over the sea. The waves crashed against the bow of the Atlantis, splashing the forecastle with foam and spray. The torpedo boats escorting the Atlantis to the border of the minefield turned away.

The raider was left alone. And then the surprises began. To begin with, a mine was discovered, jumping on the waves just fifty meters from the ship. The sailors, huddled at the rails, began to wonder whose it was - English, or their own, German? Someone noticed that even if the mine is its own, it does not become less dangerous from this. The horned monster bowed to the Atlantis for a long time, now approaching, then moving away, until it was carried away somewhere behind the stern. Then the signalman reported that he saw the masts. Beneath the Norwegian coast, keeping close to each other, three fishing trawlers danced on the waves. Rogge decided not to notice them. The trawlers were already out of sight when they reported from the radio room that a radiogram had been transmitted from the trawlers, encrypted in the English naval code ...

Behind the stern of the Atlantis, dropping tons of water from itself, the submarine U-37 surfaced, specially sent to this area in order, if necessary, to drive away enemy surface ships from the raider. But in this weather it was of little use. Rogge expected to leave the area by dawn, but the oncoming storm, which had already reached a strength of 10 points, confused all his plans. Especially if he has to go further with a submarine. Having informed the boat of the place of the future rendezvous with a short signal, Atlantis moved on.

At dawn, the storm was still going on, but the sky was completely clear of clouds, giving an excellent opportunity to spot the raider from the air. Intelligence messages received by radio also did not promise anything good: British cruisers are on guard duty in the Shetland Islands, auxiliary cruisers are combing the Denmark Strait, there is an increased activity of enemy reconnaissance aircraft ...

As soon as dawn broke, the signalman saw the top of someone's mast on the horizon. Rogge ordered to play a combat alert. The Atlantis's senior gunner, Lieutenant Commander Kash, quickly deployed the rangefinder in the direction of the seen mast.

A minute later, the bridge was reported that all the guns were ready for battle. Rogge watched the horizon as several more masts rose slowly. Chief Engineer Kielhorn was called to the bridge.

"Let's run away," said Rogge. What can you offer us?

"Sixteen, seventeen knots at most," replied the senior engineer, shivering from the cold on the bridge, especially penetrating after the steam room of the engine room.

Atlantis began to gain momentum. Slowly, painfully slowly, the masts and chimneys of unknown ships began to disappear over the horizon. The success of the ocean raider depends almost entirely on "lady luck". It was the first success of Atlantis. Not pursued by anyone, he continued his way north. Unknown ships either simply did not notice him, or noticed, but decided not to be distracted from some kind of their own task ...

Only later on the Atlantis did they learn what danger they had escaped. A few days before the German invasion of Norway, the British decided to reinforce their demands to the Norwegian government to mine the Leeds Canal between the coast of Norway and the offshore islands by sending a powerful task force to Norway, consisting of a battleship and 16 destroyers. The masts of these destroyers were seen from the Atlantis.

Jan Mayen Island appeared alone from the starboard side of the Atlantis when the submarine U-37 rejoined the raider. The ship was in the very center of the low pressure area.

There was no wind. The sun of the short polar day was setting in the sea, sparkling like its own reflection in a mirror. There was some kind of gloomy calm and silence, broken only by the noise of the wave breaking against the bow of the ship. To the left of the stern, mercilessly swaying, was the submarine "U-37".

As we moved north, the days became shorter and the nights longer. The sky often shimmered with northern lights, which the sailors of the Atlantis, like all people on earth, looked with some mystical awe. Having safely passed the two most dangerous sections of the first stage of the journey to the open ocean, Atlantis approached the third, the Danish Strait. To reduce the chances of any unexpected encounters, Rogge decided to take as far north as possible, keeping to the very edge of the Greenland pack ice, so that, despite all navigational problems, he was as far from the coast of Iceland as possible. Whole

the crew of the ship was in their places on alert. Rogge did not leave the bridge.

On April 9, Lieutenant More, whose duties as adjutant included listening to enemy radio transmissions, learned from a BBC report about the German invasion of Norway. The official communiqué of the German High Command followed only a few hours later and was transmitted via the ship's broadcast.

On the Atlantis, this news was received with a sense of relief, because they managed to slip between the main body of the English and German fleets when they made their way through the narrowness between the coasts of Norway and Britain. Everyone also realized that if they failed to break into the Atlantic, it would be almost impossible to return to Germany by the same route.

The weather suddenly began to deteriorate again, less than 10 minutes later, the Atlantis found itself in the center of a ferocious Arctic storm. Chief Petty Officer Pigors, pointing Mora to the submarine, remarked:

"For us it's just a storm, but for them it's pure hell, Lieutenant.

Pigors, who had sailed all over the world in his time, knew what he was talking about. And Mort himself had seen such a storm for the first time in his life, although he also swam a lot. It seemed that the waves were not rushing along the surface of the sea, but falling from the sky. The hull of the Atlantis groaned and groaned as if in death throes. The icing of the guns began.

The sailors of the Atlantis, exhausted from two sleepless nights, languishing from seasickness, freezing and falling from their feet, not knowing a second of rest, chipped the ice from the gun barrels and locks, constantly wiping the sights and aiming helms. Ice spray covered the faces of officers and sailors with a frozen crust, covering their eyes and freezing their cheeks. The thermometer showed -17°C. Fur hats, which were issued to the crew, mainly to make the sailors look like Soviet sailors in them, were very useful in such weather, when waves, wind, snow and ice splashes rushed towards the ship like angry Valkyries. But no matter how hard it was for Atlantis, the submarine had even worse. Tons of ice hung from her deckhouse, and from the bridge of the Atlantis they watched their escorter with increasing anxiety, as if they hadn't died at all.

The submarine was unthinkableably chattering both onboard and in pitching; from the outside, she already looked like a small iceberg, but stubbornly kept on course, following the Atlantis. Despite all the hardships, stormy weather helped to pass through the strait unnoticed. Rogge steered the ship just a mere 50 meters from the edge of the pack ice that piled up on the starboard side.

At the southern exit from the Denmark Strait, the submarine completed its mission. Having conveyed the signal lamp "Good hunting", the boat disappeared behind the stern of the raider. In the afternoon of the same day, the sailors of the Atlantis observed an interesting phenomenon when the warm Gulf Stream joined the cold northern current. Clouds of steam rose above the dark shafts, creating the complete illusion of boiling water.

III

Over the next few days, the Atlantis crossed the main shipping lanes of the North Atlantic. British ships darted around, thankfully paying no attention to the Atlantis. One of them passed so close to the raider that it is clear

his guns were visible. The instructions forbade the Atlantis from attacking anyone in these waters. It was allowed to open fire only in case of an attack on him. The "hunting ground" of the Atlantis lay thousands of miles south, under a tropical sun.

The first person seen from the bridge of the Atlantis, continuing south, was a sailing ship, the name of which remained unknown - apparently Scandinavian. It was beautiful in the first rays of the rising sun. A three-masted barque, full of grace and grace, flew across the ocean, tilting forward a snow-white garland filled with a fresh breeze of sails. The sailboat looked like a woman walking in a long white dress down a muddy street.

"Even if it's English and full of contraband, I'd still consider sinking it or not," Rogge announced to his officers. And, most likely, would not have drowned. It is simply indecent to sink sailboats these days. I would even say that it is bad taste.

The officers knew their commander's weakness for sailing ships, and therefore the unknown ship was allowed to follow its own path. In addition, Atlantis was still in such latitudes where it was dangerous to draw undue attention to itself. The sailboat seemed more like a beautiful creation of nature than human hands. He was greeted with admiring glances...

When the Atlantis entered the purple waters of the Sargasso Sea, it was decided to no longer disguise the raider as a Soviet auxiliary vessel. The sickle, hammer, and red star had done their job and now needed to be replaced. The Soviet flag was lowered, and in its place the flag of the Rising Sun, the flag of an almost unknown and mysterious nation, was raised. However, everyone knew that Japan was neutral and could stand up for its neutrality. Nobody wanted to contact the Japanese on the high seas, just like with the Russians. A new name was written on board - "Kashii Maru" (cargo-passenger ship with a displacement of 8400 tons).

Meanwhile, the Atlantis had crossed the Tropic of Cancer. White clouds floated majestically across the bottomless blue sky, the sun sparkled, the ocean sparkled with a cobalt surface, a soft warm breeze blew. At night, directly ahead of the ship, the Southern Cross sparkled, becoming larger and brighter every night.

The Atlantis was approaching the equator when the signalmen reported that someone's masts appeared on the horizon to starboard bow. They sounded a combat alarm, and people fled to their places. It turned out to be Ellerman's City of Exeter liner, sailing from somewhere south to England.

The senior artilleryman issued target designations for the guns and looked inquiringly at the commander. Rogge lowered his binoculars and commanded:

- Leave it! The target will not be attacked.

- Will not be? The officers looked at each other and looked back at the commander.

- Leave it! repeated Rogge, explaining that he did not want to burden the ship with hundreds of prisoners at an early stage of the operation, among which there were probably women and children who required special treatment, and possibly diets. It is also possible that some women and children will die in the confusion of an urgent descent to rescue equipment.

But even if we do not take into account issues of humanitarianism, it would be unwise from all points of view to start the operation with an attack on a passenger liner.

Lieutenant Moore at this time had something else to worry about. As the Atlantis approached the British liner, the adjutant saw dozens of binoculars from the bridge and decks of the City of

Exeter" carefully examined the German raider. Is there anyone among them who knows Japanese? The fact is that Lieutenant More decorated the stern and sides of the Atlantis with hieroglyphs copied from a magazine illustration.

The photograph was of a house in Tokyo with a sign on it. From this sign Mor copied the hieroglyphs, having no idea what they mean. Of course, there were clever people on the Atlantis itself who claimed knowledge of the Japanese language, they assured More that he had decorated the sides of the ship with advertising calls for a brothel. It is not known whether there were experts in the Japanese language on the British liner, but, looking at the deck and superstructures of the "Japanese" ship, they could make sure that they were facing a peaceful cargo-passenger ship. Sailors and officers were in civilian clothes, and some even in kimonos. Kimono, some of them decorated with flowers, miraculously managed to get from one of the warehouses in Kiel. Moreover, one of the sailors, portraying a happy father, rolled a baby carriage around the deck. Lieutenant Mohr stood on the bridge, wearing what looked like a kimono with sunglasses over his eyes, and a straw hat.

From the high bridge of the British liner, a group of officers examined the Atlantis through binoculars.

A meeting in the ocean is always an event, and a meeting in the Atlantic with a Japanese ship is already exotic. However, having examined the Kashii Maru, the British officers calmly dispersed, not finding anything suspicious. The Atlantis's camouflage passed the first test, although Rogge was constantly worried about how well his ship was camouflaged as a civilian merchant ship.

The Atlantis's navigator, Lieutenant Kamenetz, himself a former captain of the merchant fleet, often took a boat and, together with More, circled the ship around, paying attention to all the small details of the ship's appearance. It was noticed, for example, that the wooden shields camouflaging the guns were covered with rust at the joints with bolts, and therefore did not look quite ordinary.

Since the Atlantis sailed under the Japanese flag, symbols of the rising sun were painted on the shields to hide this shortcoming. Other methods of camouflage were also used. At night, the navigation lights were reversed, giving the observer from the darkness the impression that the ship was heading north instead of south.

On the morning of May 3, as suddenly as usual, the routine work on board was interrupted by the cry of a signalman who discovered the masts on the horizon. Under the calls of the combat alarm, Atlantis changed course in the indicated direction.

The steamer that appeared was clearly English, with a long saling, a tall chimney and a gloomy, dark-colored superstructure. For navigator Kamenetz, this ship nostalgically reminded of the old days when he, commanding a merchant fleet steamer, stood side by side with the British in different ports, spending time in joint revelry.

The ship was called the Scientist. The Atlantis approached its first victim with every precaution. The British could see only two people on the bridge - the captain and the watch navigator. The rest, including the senior artilleryman and three rangefinders, hid under a tarpaulin. On the upper deck, a civilian audience was walking and a stroller with a child was rolling around.

The raider's signalers had picked up two signal flags and were preparing to raise them. One of them was the traditional "XL" signal - "Stop or open fire!" The second is "Don't use the radio!"

Lieutenant More, who was standing next to Rogge on the bridge, lowered his binoculars and looked at the commander expectantly. Rogge nodded.

"Open guns!" Wooden shields fell to the deck.

"Crane" turned into gun number 3. The stern superstructure disappeared, revealing another 150 mm gun. The Japanese flag fell from the gaff, and the battle flag of the German fleet slowly crept up. The whole thing took exactly two seconds.

"Everything works like clockwork," someone remarked.

Lieutenant More caught himself thinking that the whole procedure reminded him of a movie he had seen many times before. At the same moment, both signals were raised on the mast, and a small gun hidden on the forecastle fired a warning shot to reinforce the meaning of the raised signals.

However, to everyone's surprise, the ship not only did not respond to the raised signal, but did not react to it at all. However, he reacted, but not at all in the way that was expected of him.

The radio room of the Atlantis reported to the bridge that the English steamer was continuously broadcasting a radiogram: "QQQ ... Unidentified merchant ship orders me to stop."

Later it turned out that the English ship did not respond to the signals of the Atlantis because it did not even bother to read them. There was not a soul to be seen on board, except for the captain standing on the bridge.

Suddenly, the silhouette of the ship began to change, becoming smaller and smaller. It turned around, and soon from the Atlantis they saw a white wake behind the stern of the English steamer. He tried to leave.

- Open fire! Rogge ordered.

Guns roared, sharp pain hitting the ears of everyone on the bridge of the Atlantis, which had begun hostilities. Powder smoke enveloped the bridge, temporarily obscuring the target. When it dissipated, everyone saw white columns of water rising incredibly slowly around the steamer. Another volley, and two sparkling red flowers seemed to blossom on the deck of the ship, raising a whole cloud of dirty gray dust, as if from a beaten carpet. The shells of the next volley were already rushing towards the steamer when the signalman shouted:

- They stopped!

The steamer began to bleed steam, the virgin white cloud of which rose into the sparkling blue sky.

- Stop shooting! Rogge ordered, and suddenly there was complete silence.

The decks of the ship were now filled with people feverishly lowering boats, and a cloud of snow-white steam began to mix with the black smoke of the fire that had begun on the ship. A boat was also launched from the Atlantis, sending a prize team to the steamer, which included Lieutenants Fehler and More.

Fehler was a demolition man and was carrying several boxes of dynamite to the Saintist, and Mohr asked the commander for leave, wanting, as he put it, to visit "English territory." Rogge ordered his adjutant to take care of the prisoners, which later became one of the main duties of the young adjutant.

When the cutter approached the steamer, More was terribly surprised that among the sailors of the "Syntista" who were crowded at the rails, there were actually no whites - only Indians. On the deck of the ship, the captain met the prize team. His gaze was cold, but he behaved with restraint and politeness. More interrupted the somewhat protracted pause:

"May I have a look at the ship's papers, Captain.

It turned out that the "Syntist" was going from Durban to Freetown, where the ship was supposed to join the convoy going to England. The steamer carried a cargo of iron ore, chromium, copper, cowhide, tree bark, jute, as well as wheat and corn flour. Everything was clear. Fehler went to plant explosives, and Mohr began to search the pilothouse and the captain's cabin for secret instructions and documents, radio ciphers and mail. A chronometer, binoculars and signal flags were also taken from the ship. The Scientist was a very old ship, and the captain's cabin was half the size of the one that Lieutenant More occupied on the Atlantis. The ship's radio room was almost completely destroyed by a direct hit from a shell. The radio operator survived by some miracle, escaping with a slight wound in the arm.

There was a sharp smell of burning jute on the ship, and a dead Indian lay on the deck with a broken skull. A trickle of blood ran from him to the bulwark. Mort felt nauseous. Prior to that, he had seen corpses only in the anatomical theater. Young sailors, who also for the first time in the war had to see the dead, stood behind the lieutenant, pale and silent. More hastened to lead them aside, away from the dead Indian. Kingstons were opened on the Saintist, blowing up several bulkheads, and he quickly sank to the bottom. The prisoners were taken to the Atlantis, where they had to be registered, accommodated, put on allowance and given out bedding. Some needed to be interrogated.

The captain of the "Syntista" Windsor was a retired Royal Navy officer and MBE. He was very worried about the loss of his ship, and even more so about the success of the Germans. He was resting in his cabin when the bridge watch spotted the Atlantis. And, although they were strictly ordered to immediately call the captain to the bridge if any vessel was found, they did not. And when they did, it was too late...

Having sunk the Saintist, the Atlantis, in the rapidly falling darkness, turned to the distant shore in order to set up a minefield on the routes from Freetown and to Freetown under the very noses of the British. Everyone on the ship understood the danger of Rogge's venture to lay mines a mile from the coast. Moreover, the night was lunar and starry. After a while, the coastline opened up in the distance, for the first time in the entire voyage.

The sight of the coast on the horizon always causes some depression among sailors, even when you realize that this is an enemy coast and you are not expected there at all. In addition to mines, special buoys were supposed to be installed near the coast, simulating the presence of submarines. The laying of mines took place without any interference, and on May 18 the first reaction of the enemy was intercepted by radio. Radio Cape Town announced the explosion of a ship off Cape

On May 22, the Atlantis radio room intercepted a warning to all British ships at sea about an enemy raider disguised as a Japanese merchant ship. It was an unpleasant surprise that shocked everyone on the Atlantis. Apparently, someone on the City of Exeter turned out to be much more attentive than Rogge and Mor thought ...

On May 23, the Kashii Maru was finished. Atlantis raised the Dutch flag, and a new name appeared on board - Abbekerk. The bright "Japanese" colors of the sides and superstructures were replaced by a strict gray-olive color. On May 25, the officers of the Atlantis suffered another shock when a radio message was received from the Propaganda Ministry in Berlin that eight British merchant ships had been lost.

on the mines set by the German raider at Cape Agulhas. In addition, the Ministry of Propaganda added, three enemy minesweepers were killed on this barrier. Let everyone know that there is a raider in the area. After all, a submarine could also put mines ...

Fortunately, the whole world was not up to the little German raider in the endless ocean. Germany launched a "blitzkrieg" on the western front. Daily radio "Atlantis" received messages about the battles won, the cities captured, about the exit of tank columns to Dunkirk. And then the radio operator, waving a blank radiogram, ran up to the bridge, forgetting all the rules of subordination and yelling: "Our people have taken Paris!"

The news spread throughout the ship before Rogge could announce it over the ship's broadcast. Marches and patriotic songs shook all the radio waves.

Most of the sailors of the Atlantis were convinced that a peace would be announced soon, and even fantasized that the Atlantis would be able to pay a friendly visit to Durban, since it was near the Cape of Good Hope, and even to Cape Town with its gorgeous beaches and beautiful girls...

To commemorate the fall of Paris, Rogge ordered a half-litre mug of beer per person. This was not enough for most. "Why only a circle?" Sailors grumbled displeasedly. "And do not hope that everything is already over," Rogge replied. As for the officers, they celebrated the fall of Paris with champagne in the wardroom. Many officers also believed that the war would soon end. Since France has fallen, there is no one to fight with.

— And England? someone asked.

The answer was an explosion of laughter.

What can England do alone?

"America will help her," the opponents did not give up.

This ridiculous assumption caused a new explosion of laughter.

— America? We know, we know. It's those warriors!

Under the influence of champagne vapor, a kind of sweepstakes was even organized. Each officer contributed money and named the month when, in his opinion, the war would end. The stakes were distributed from August to Christmas.

Only the ship's doctor did not take part in the general fun. Usually cheerful, he looked gloomy and thoughtful.

- What is your opinion, doctor? Mor asked.

Dr. Reil chuckled.

- Well, if you are interested in my opinion, then I believe this: the war will end somewhere in June-July ... - He paused and finished - ... 1945!

This statement of the doctor caused such an attack of laughter that tears ran down the cheeks of many.

"You, doctor, are the best at reassuring," Feller remarked. Reil shrugged his shoulders and turned to Mort:

— What do you think?

Mor smiled. The officers waited with interest for an answer.

- I completely agree with you, doctor, and also put on July 1945.

The calls of the combat alarm tore off the officers from their seats, making it clear that the whole war could not be spent in cheerful conversations over champagne. Another ship was found from the bridge.

As it turned out later, it was the Norwegian ship "Tirranna". His captain, not understanding what was happening, signaled: "We will not let some lousy Dutchman overtake us!"

As a result, the race lasted three hours. It was a sunny day on June 10, 1941. The Atlantis was slowly catching up with the Tyrranna, stubbornly refusing to respond to any signals, following an almost parallel course. Having reached a distance of 4.5 miles, Atlantis opened fire. But before the first shells of warning shots fell near the Norwegian steamer, the Tyrranna returned fire and began broadcasting distress and warning signals.

Atlantis had to make 30 volleys before the ship stopped and its radio went silent. When Lieutenant More went up on the deck of the Tyrranna, he saw that the entire upper deck of the ship was literally covered in blood. In some places on the deck, the blood even gathered into small puddles. Five Norwegian sailors were killed and many wounded. The captain, learning that he had been attacked by a German raider, could not hold back his tears, saying:

"But Norway made peace with you today."

The Norwegian captain, consciously or not, fell into error.

The peace agreement concluded between Germany and the Norwegian government of Quisling did not apply to Norwegian ships in the world's oceans. These ships served British-controlled ports, carried cargo under British licenses, and carried out orders from the Norwegian government-in-exile.

"Tirranna" turned out to be a very valuable prize - modern, roomy and fast.

The cargo on board was no less valuable. It included 3,000 tons of wheat and 6,000 bales of wool. In addition, 178 trucks, 5,500 cases of beer, 300 bags of tobacco, and mountains of food, including 3,000 cans of canned peaches and 17,000 cans of jam, were found in the holds of the ship.

It was obvious that the Tyrranna was too valuable a prize to be sunk. Rogge decided to reload part of the food on the Atlantis, primarily fruits, and send the ship itself to Germany. The Tyrranna was fast enough and looked Norwegian enough to avoid capture by the British along the way.

In addition, something more interesting than cars and food was found aboard the Tyrranna. It was mail destined for the officers and men of the Australian Expeditionary Force, or, to be more precise, the first shipment of mail since the corps had been sent out of Egypt.

The mail contained countless testimonies of the warmth and care of the women who remained in distant Australia.

There were parcels of homemade sweets, cigarettes, fruit, and at least five thousand pairs of socks, lovingly knitted from fine, soft wool. And, of course, tens of thousands of letters sent to soldiers by their wives and mothers, brides and sisters,

fathers and grandfathers. The content of all letters was almost the same: "Write as soon as possible", "take care of yourself", "I hope you receive my package on your birthday" ...

But war is war. The officers of the Norwegian ship told the Germans that a representative of naval intelligence in Melbourne, instructing them before going to sea, assured them that the Indian Ocean was completely safe, and the mines found at Agulhas, apparently, remained in memory of the "Count Spee", destroyed several months ago.

Atlantis could not stay long. The Tyrranna managed to broadcast a signal about the attack, and although she incorrectly indicated her place, and the signal itself was partially drowned out by the Germans, it was quite risky to remain at the site of the capture of the steamer.

Transferring a small prize crew to the Tyrranna, Rogge ordered them to go south, far south - almost to the very Antarctic ice, and remain there until the arrival of the Atlantis.

Atlantis overtook its next victim on July 11. She turned out to be the English ship City of Baghdad. England was still fighting, and those who bet on July, hoping that it was in this month of 1940 that the war would end, already realized that their money was crying.

The City of Baghdad was a German-built steamer captured by the Allies as reparations after the First World War. He had such a Germanic appearance that it was inconvenient to fire at him. Atlantis was forced to make the first salvo only from a distance of 3000 m, when the ship did not obey the order to stop and broadcast a whole stream of warning radiograms, describing the appearance of the Atlantis and indicating its place.

After the first salvo of the Atlantis, the radio station of the English steamer fell silent. The projectile successfully hit between the radio room and the captain's cabin, injuring the radio operator and partially destroying both rooms.

When Lieutenant More, at the head of the prize crew, boarded the ship, he found the captain rummaging through the drawers of his desk with the intention of leaving nothing there that could be used by the enemy. The whole room was littered with debris from the explosion of the shell, and it was amazing how the captain himself managed to survive. As More entered the cabin, the captain of the City of Baghdad, Armstrong White, turned his back on him, pretending not to notice him. After a moment's silence, Mort remarked peacefully:

"Your cabin is a mess, sir.

"Yes," the captain agreed, without turning around and continuing to rummage through the boxes, "it's true that I have a little mess in my cabin.

"It could have been worse," Mort sympathized. - You're still lucky.

- Do you think? Captain White continued to make small talk, while trying to hide the radio call log.

Mort took the magazine from him, soon convinced that if he stayed for five minutes and let the captain destroy or hide the magazine, the Atlantis could get into a difficult situation. The fact is that the radio messages from the City of Baghdad, despite all the attempts of Atlantis to drown them out, were received by some American ship that was somewhere nearby.

The American went on the air immediately, relaying English distress signals.

steamer and at the same time asking him: "Who is firing at you?" Then the "pro-English neutral" began to request a detailed description of the "Atlantis" and, finally, asked: "Do you need help?", clearly intending to provide this help.

This, as they say, was just not enough! Fortunately, the Germans had a magazine with call signs in their hands, and the Atlantis radio station, on behalf of the City of Baghdad, transmitted to the stubborn American: "My previous radiograms are erroneous. I repeat..."

The American, apparently, was satisfied with this, since he did not appear on the air anymore.

The City of Baghdad was sent to the bottom with demolition charges. At the same time, the Atlantis experienced several anxious minutes, since the explosions on the ship had already sounded, and Lieutenant Fehler still did not appear on deck. Fortunately, he nevertheless appeared when the ship was already listing noticeably to starboard. Everything ended well.

It turned out that Fehler decided in practice to test his own detonation scheme, different from the one in the instructions, and was somewhat delayed.

Regarding his innovation, he had a conversation with Rogge in the commander's cabin. The conversation, according to Fehler, "was not friendly in nature."

IV

On July 12, Lieutenant Mor, listening to radio messages from neutral countries, came across a news report from San Francisco, during which the cold voice of a distant announcer announced: "The Dutch ship Abbekerk was sunk ..."

Mort didn't get the gist of the message at first. Well, sunk so sunk. Who knows who is drowned during the war! And then the thought burned like lightning: "Abbekerk" - This is the name that Atlantis now bore!

On the same night, the Abbekerk disappeared without a trace, and a neutral Swede appeared in its place, shining with fresh paint on the sides and superstructures. And the next morning, July 13, the Atlantis signalers found the next victim, which turned out to be the British passenger liner Kimmendine, going from Cape Town to Rangoon. The passengers on the liner were mostly women with children who had taken a sea voyage to reunite with their husbands in Burma.

There were also Indian merchants with their families evacuated from Gibraltar. Just that night, the sailors removed the blackout from the windows, believing that all the dangers associated with German submarines were left behind.

Passengers have already joked about the super-caution of the captain of the liner. Most of the passengers had only had time to have breakfast when those strolling on the upper deck saw an unknown ship on the horizon. Passengers, anticipating a few minutes of at least visual communication with their own kind in the open ocean, rushed to the boat deck to get a better look at the emerging ship.

To the passengers on the Kimmendine, the war seemed very, very far away. So thought the captain, who transmitted by radio, as required by the instructions, a message about a meeting with an unidentified ocean wanderer ... Hearing that the liner was transmitting a radio message, at 09:30

The Atlantis opened fire.

— Brilliant, Kash! Rogge praised his senior gunner.

The liner stopped. His radio was silent. The signal for surrender was raised on the mast. A cloud of smoke enveloped the defiantly snow-white superstructure of the liner.

Lieutenant Commander Kash smiled contentedly. The gunners of the Atlantis once again demonstrated their highest skill. One shell hit the liner in the waterline, the second destroyed the radio room.

The liner began to lower the boats, which were gradually filled to death with frightened passengers. Lieutenant More was preparing to take the prize crew to the Kimmendine. But then something incredible happened. The gun at the stern of the liner flashed with a flash of a shot! Someone shouted: "He opened fire!"

A column of water, like a huge exclamation mark, rose from the very side of the Atlantis, dousing everyone on the bridge. Rogge turned purple with anger and surprise.

- Fire! he ordered. And the guns roared again.

Looking at the commander, Lieutenant Mor was afraid that Rogge intended to blow the liner to pieces with a rain of shells.

"It's some kind of mistake, Commander!" shouted Kamenets, peering through binoculars through clouds of powder smoke. — The gun has only one person. Apparently, this is some kind of psycho who does not understand what he is doing ...

Rogge did not answer, but it was evident from his appearance that he hesitated. Finally, he waved his hand dismissively.

- Stop shooting!

Kamenets' intervention brought Rogge back to reality and to the realization that the passengers in the lifeboats could suffer from such a continuation of the incident. But realizing this further angered the commander of the Atlantis.

By his nature, he was a man who did not like unnecessary sacrifices and destruction even in a military situation. The psychopath, who seized upon the stern gun of the liner, provoked Rogge into an act that he did not want to do at all. For this reason, Rogge got even more angry. And when it became clear that the victims of this incident could well have been women and children, Rogge's rage reached a boiling point ...

Lieutenant More, who arrived with the prize crew on the liner, found it burning in several places. Whether this was the result of shells from the Atlantis or arson, it was difficult to say. Incredible chaos reigned on the ship. More entered a room that apparently served as a restaurant for 1st class passengers. The room was completely destroyed by a shell hit. Shards of broken crockery, dinnerware, tablecloths and napkins were everywhere. The large dining table was on fire. The remnants of broken chairs were also on fire.

Not wanting to waste precious minutes, More ran out into the corridor to find the ship's office and pick up the documents he needed. But as soon as he took a few steps, the corridor was filled with black and suffocating smoke, behind which the flame crackled and bubbled.

Sooty and breathless, Pestilence struggled its way to the upper deck. There he found the prize-winning team in a state of complete disorganization. Break into the lower rooms

succeeded, there could be no question of any search of the ship.

"Damned number thirteen!" shouted Lieutenant Fehler. "We can't even blow up that damn liner!"

- My God! Mor yelled in horror. "Our demolition charges!"

They had been piled up on the upper deck when they boarded the liner, and now the dynamite crates were already in flames.

- All overboard, damn it! Mor growled.

The officers and sailors of the prize crew literally fell from the upper deck straight into their boats, not having time to take anything from the ship, except for a baby bear, which More took for good luck. Meanwhile, the boats, crowded with women and children, were already dancing on the swell near the very side of the Atlantis. Many passengers were hysterical.

For God's sake, don't kill me! - sobbing, shouted some little Indian. -Do not kill me! Save!

His black eyes were filled with horror. Dragged onto the deck of the Atlantis, he continued to scream hysterically to not be killed.

The shock of the experience seized almost all the passengers. Women and children were hauled aboard using cargo nets and containers to load coal.

When Lieutenant More returned from his less than successful trip to the Kimmendine, he saw that the deck of the raider had become completely different from the deck of a warship, as it was filled with women, children and British sailors. Captain 1st Rank Rogge listened to More's report without any pleasure. He felt sorry for wasting torpedoes on the liner. But, since it was not possible to blow up the Kimmendine, there was no other way to sink it. To send the liner to the bottom, I had to spend two torpedoes. The Kimmendain broke in half, her bow and stern parts rising from the water, taking the form of a huge flaming letter "U", which disappeared from the surface of the sea in a few minutes.

"We're in for a nasty story," Rogge admitted as Lieutenant More and the commander of the Atlantis relished the sight of their next victim sinking into the abyss. "It's just indecent to shoot so much at a passenger ship. Did you find out, More, who is the idiot who opened fire on the Atlantis?"

"Some young man from London," Mort reported. — They say that in peacetime he was a window cleaner.

- A window cleaner? Rogge was surprised.

"At least that's what they told me," Mort replied.

Rogge sighed.

"Really, what else can you expect from a window cleaner?"

Mor was silent. Personally, he did not see any connection between the civilian profession and the effectiveness of service on the ship. Among the best specialists called up from the reserve and now serving on the Atlantis were car drivers, milk peddlers, and cement plant workers. You never know who did what "in civilian life"?

"So what are you going to do with him?" Mor asked the commander. -Judge? He opened fire after the ship raised the signal to surrender. According to the article...

"All right," Rogge waved his hand. -Let's forget about it. No one died on the liner, which was also a great success.

More later interrogated the "window cleaner", who, to his surprise, turned out to be a London lawyer, who explained his behavior. The first shell from the Atlantis pierced the steam line, and the noise of the escaping steam drowned out all commands given from the bridge. Telephone communication with the bridge was also broken, and he did not notice the surrender signal. These explanations satisfied More, and he decided to consider the incident settled.

The appearance of children on the Atlantis led many sailors of the raider (especially family ones) into a strong excitement. They had not seen their children for almost five months, which could not but affect their behavior.

To begin with, they built a sandbox for the children, using tarpaulin and sand that served as ballast in the holds. Several chairs were placed around the sandbox, on which mothers could sit and supervise their children. The sailors made toys for them, and the coca was treated to chocolate from the officers' stocks.

More difficult was the problem of accommodating such unusual prisoners. Women and children were placed in cockpits on the forecastle. Each cubicle had six beds, two tables, a couple of cans and a washbasin. The room wasn't luxurious, but it wasn't anything better.

Indian merchants lost all the money they earned on the wrecked liner - they handed it over to the captain, but, of course, they did not manage to get it back. But they took it philosophically. "The main thing is life, and money is a gain. They will return."

It was time for the Atlantis itself to return to the Tyrranna, which had been defending in Antarctic waters for six weeks. Approaching the rendezvous point, Rogge found out that during all this time the Tyrranna had not even noticed the haze on the horizon. This means that the selected area was unvisited. And Rogge ordered August 2 to be devoted to repainting the Atlantis hull and routine maintenance of the machines - work that had already been repeatedly postponed.

After completing these works, Rogge expected to send the Tyrranna to Germany, transferring all prisoners from Atlantis to it, primarily women and children, who, given the specifics of Atlantis's actions, could become a significant obstacle to further operations. Under the leadership of the first mate Kuen, the sailors, like beetles, stuck around the masts and superstructures, were lowered on cradles overboard and began repainting the ship. The weather was calm and clear all day, but towards evening it began to deteriorate: the sky was covered with clouds, drizzling with light rain, visibility deteriorated.

As a result, his fifth victim landed right in the jaws of Atlantis, appearing from a veil of rain just a couple of hundred meters from the raider.

Unexpected signals of combat alarm led to some confusion even Rogge himself. For a moment there was complete confusion on the Atlantis, when the sailors, having thrown buckets of paint, slid off the masts and climbed out of the cradles, running like cats covered in paint over the combat posts.

At first, the unknown ship was mistaken for an English auxiliary cruiser, but it soon became clear that it was the Norwegian ship Talleyrand, which, by some inexplicable coincidence, turned out to be absolutely the same type as the Tyrranna.

From the steamer, through the veil of rain, they noticed the silhouette of their brother and changed course. Atlantis' warning shots took the Norwegians completely by surprise and they surrendered without bloodshed.

Preparations for the departure of the Tyrranna to Germany were quickly completed, but it was necessary to warn Berlin about this by radio, so that the Norwegian ship would not be sunk by any German submarine along the way. But this had to be done in such a way as not to give the place of Atlantis to the British. Rogge decided to go down another 1,000 miles to the south, from there give a radiogram and head north at full speed, leaving the area occupied by the British empty.

On August 4, Atlantis said goodbye to Tirranna.

The Norwegian ship took all women and children, all men over 50, its own crew and the crew of the Talleyrand.

Former passengers of the Kimmendine stood on the upper deck of the Tyrranna and waved their hands to the Atlantis, singing in chorus the touching song "Goodbye Sally."

The Tyrranna slowly melted on the horizon, and the Atlantis, as Rogge had planned, went south, gave a radiogram to Berlin, reporting the Tyrranna, and went north at full speed.

After 20 days, the raider was already in the Madagascar region. On August 24, a steamer was noticed from the Atlantis, which was standing idle in the night, which immediately aroused suspicion on the raider. Huddled in the drizzle, Lieutenant More tried to look at the ship through the night binoculars. The night was dark, moonless and starless.

- What is this ship? Usually traders go at full speed at night, often changing courses, trying to cover as much distance as possible during the night. And this one stands silently without lights.

"Now we turn," Rogge said, "gain speed and get closer to him to get a better look.

The Atlantis began to turn around, picking up speed, and soon saw the unknown steamer again. This time the ship was moving slowly. Then, quite unexpectedly, he stopped again. Did they spot Atlantis from it? Everyone on the bridge was sure it was.

"Look," said the watch officer, "if this is an innocent merchant, then why doesn't he follow the instructions of his Admiralty and turn away when he sees us?"

"Why would he turn away," the communications officer continued, "if our 'innocent merchant' is a trap ship, not only for submarines, but for us ...

The Atlantis officers knew that the British had deployed more than 30 auxiliary cruisers in the ocean to hunt for German commercial raiders, which looked like innocent merchant ships from the outside. While the officers on the bridge of the Atlantis racked their brains trying to identify the mysterious ship, it set sail again, resuming its mysteriously lazy waddle across the sea.

The Atlantis followed for almost an hour, keeping on a parallel course, expecting every minute that the dark silhouette of the strange steamer would suddenly be illuminated by the flashes of her guns. The steamer, meanwhile, continued to go on its course, not showing the slightest interest in the Atlantis. Even the silent Kamenz shook his head.

"I confess that all this looks suspicious, even very suspicious.

Rogge and Chief Gunner Kash stood side by side, dimly lit by the illumination of the compass.

"Let's wait until dawn," Rogge decided. "Unless, of course, he will let us do it." We open fire at dawn. First, two shells - in case we made a mistake. If not, then the full program!

With the first rays of dawn, as if saluting the sun, the guns of the Atlantis rumbled. They fired two shots, scoring two direct hits from the first salvo. The steamer was enveloped in clouds of black smoke, and then the flames suddenly burst out in the very core of the ship, covering the bridge with their tongues.

On the Atlantis, they were tensely expecting return fire, but there was none. The unidentified steamer burned as if Atlantis shells had hit a tank of gasoline. In the light of this raging fiery hell, the Atlantis clearly saw a tiny anti-submarine gun on the stern of the steamer, common to merchant ships. The gun was turned along the diametrical plane, there were no gunners near it. The ship had no more weapons.

- Lower the boat! Rogge ordered.

Now it was necessary to render all possible assistance to this ship, which was hampered by a very strong swell characteristic of the Indian Ocean. The wave height reached almost four meters and there was a danger that such a wave could overwhelm or capsize the boat. Lieutenant More could only be glad that they would have to make a voyage to the burning steamer on ocean launches taken as a trophy from the Tyrranna, since ordinary German boats and motor boats were completely unsuitable for use in open ocean conditions.

To the creak of a crane and the roar of the ocean wave, the barge was lowered overboard. The wave immediately lifted the boat to its crest, threw it down, and the next one doused the entire prize crew with a salty shower. Master helmsman Cross called out to Mor over the sound of the waves: "It's also good that we are on our longboats!" Mor nodded to indicate that he fully agreed with him, although he guessed rather than heard what the foreman shouted.

The burning steamer was already in a desperate situation. Among the flames, people rushed about, trying to lower the boats. Many, without waiting for the launch of the boats, threw themselves overboard. More saw dozens of heads jumping on the waves at the side of the ship. The heat from the fire was felt at a distance of 300 meters, so there was no question of landing on a steamer.

Having found out from the survivors that there was no one left on the ship, whose name was King City, Mort reported this to the Atlantis, and Rogge, in order to stop the agony of the flaming ship, decided to finish it off with artillery. When the guns opened fire again, More and his crew were only a hundred meters from the King City, and fragments whistled very unpleasantly over the longboat. The King City was carrying 5,000 tons of coal from Cardiff to Singapore. Coal shifted as the ship rolled and, like lava, fell from the broken necks of the holds.

Before the death of "King City" behaved like a dying sea monster. When the water flooded its red-hot sides and superstructures, the steamer was enveloped in clubs of hissing and whistling steam, turned over, creating a boiling whirlpool, in the center of which giant bubbles rose and burst with noise. Steam rose over the water for several more minutes after the disappearance of the ship from the surface.

It turned out that there was no need to shell King City. At night, Atlantis was not seen from it. We saw it only at dawn, but did not have time to react to it in any way, as the Germans opened fire.

Six people were killed on the English steamer, including four navigators barely out of their teens. Rogge was dejected, realizing that if they were more attentive and less suspicious, this tragedy could have been avoided.

- But why did you stop, then give a move, then stop again? More asked the King City's first navigator.

He explained that the first time King City stopped was because the fan in one of the stokers had broken. It was repaired, but after a while the fan failed again. The next day, one of the King City officers said rather coldly to More:

"For a commercial raider, you are being too hysterical if you allow yourself to open fire without warning on a wreck like King City. Your first shell killed four cabin boys who were sleeping in their cockpit. Another died tonight in the infirmary from a shrapnel in the stomach. He was married and dreamed of returning home to his little son. Do you think this is how a naval war should go?

The dejected Mort said nothing to this, only blushed with anger. It was a mistake, a tragic mistake.

Such mistakes are inevitable in war, where the question is always this: either you will kill or you will be killed. The Atlantis was nothing more than an armed merchant ship. Any hit could be fatal for him. In such an environment, the nerves are so tense that such mistakes can happen again ...

Dinner in the mess that day passed in silence, without the usual lively conversation and jokes. It felt like everyone was a little uncomfortable. No one wanted to remember this incident.

V

Two weeks after the tragedy with the steamer "King City" another incident happened - this time with the English steamer "Etelking".

The overly vigilant captain of the steamer ordered his only stern gun to be alerted when the Atlantis was still 11 miles away. The Atlantis cut the ship's nose by raising the signal to stop. The Etelking did not stop and opened fire first. Before the Atlantis had time to return fire, the rudder electric drive failed for the first time in the entire voyage. The raider began to helplessly describe circles, which lasted for several minutes, until it was possible to switch to a manual drive from the tiller compartment. All this time, Atlantis continued to fire, naturally, not very well-aimed.

Finally, the Etelking gave up and raised the "Medical Assistance" signal. Dr. Reil was about to take his place in the boat when it was reported from the radio room that the ship had resumed transmitting the "QQQ" signal. The Atlantis immediately opened fire again, but immediately stopped it, as the radio operators reported that they had made a mistake - the alarm signal was transmitted by another ship, relaying it after being received from the Etelking.

This vessel, unknown to the Atlantis, was the Binarti, which was over the horizon and heard the thunder of the German guns.

The Etelking did not want to sink for a long time. The ship's stern sank, and the bow continued to stick out of

water like an accusatory finger. The Atlantis, approaching closer, riddled with bursts of heavy machine guns the forward tanks of the ship, after which it finally sank.

'All right,' said Rogge as the waves closed over the Etelking and his crew was lifted onto the Atlantis. "Even an ocean raider sometimes has the right to rest.

Indeed, Atlantis did a good job, sinking eight merchant ships with a total displacement of 60,000 tons.

Until recently, a peaceful Hanseatic ship managed to bring shipping in the Indian Ocean, considered the "inland pond" of Great Britain, into a state of complete chaos, and the Royal Navy into a state of turmoil close to panic.

From the stream of enemy radio transmissions and from the captured documents, it was already becoming clear how disrupted the shipping schedule in the area was. Vessels were delayed in ports, went on changed routes; thousands and thousands of tons of valuable and urgent cargo did not arrive on time.

Two dozen warships of the British darted around the Indian Ocean, trying to find the raider. Their movement, reported by naval intelligence from Berlin, was mapped and showed that the enemy had correctly identified the Atlantis area of operations. Therefore, Rogge decided to descend to the southeast, closer to Australia.

But before they had time to change course on the raider, they stumbled upon the Australian steamer Commissar Remil. Then everything went according to the usual pattern. The ship ignored the order to stop, and its radio station began to transmit an alarm signal - "QQQ", - indicating the location of the Atlantis. The raider immediately opened fire. An arc of tracer shells rushed towards the steamer, creating, in the witty expression of Lieutenant More, a "pyrotechnic bridge" between the raider and his victim.

The steamer burst into flames, and the flames began the familiar drunken dance on her superstructures. "Commissioner Remil" began to signal something to the "Atlantis", but the signalmen managed to make out only the words "send a boat" after that the signal light was no longer visible against the backdrop of the raging flames. Lieutenant Moore, as usual, led the rescue of the steamer's crew. It was not at all easy to do this at night, but, fortunately, the burning steamer illuminated the sea well with its glow, and besides, the British command took care to supply the life jackets of their sailors with signal lights. Rescue work continued for about four hours. More and his sailors were soaked to the skin and dying of the cold. The sea rocked and tossed them like dice in a cup.

The Commissar Remil continued to burn. Tongues of flame were already erupting like hellish snakes from the side windows. The roar of the flames drowned out the roar of the waves. The death of the liner occurred in the spirit of the same Wagnerian symphony as the death of the King City. When the waves captured the red-hot hull of the steamer in their cold embrace, there was a thunderous whistle and hiss. After that, there was complete darkness.

The team of "Commissar Remil" turned out to be international. The captain was a 64-year-old Scot who retired before the war. He was called up from retirement and appointed to command the ship. Of the remaining 62, fourteen were French, nine were Negroes, the rest were English or Australian. But there were very few professional sailors among them.

Lieutenant More asked an elderly Australian why he joined the merchant marine. "For the sake of laughter!" he answered. For the sake of laughter, he went to the fleet and was captured, that is, on board the Atlantis.

Going into the raid, Atlantis had 347 crew members on board. In May, 76 prisoners were added to them, in June - another 99 people, by mid-July the number of prisoners reached 327.

Then most of them were transferred to the Tyrranna, but by the end of September the number of prisoners again reached 293 people. Regarding the prisoners, there was a specific and strict instruction from the high command. They were to be locked in the hold and taken under guard for a short walk to the upper deck.

But what is easy to organize in a POW camp on the coast is almost impossible to do on a ship. Sitting in a locked hold in the tropical heat, bending over from stress, hearing the guns rumble above your head, realizing that the ship that captured them could go to the bottom at any moment - this is too much for the physical and mental state person.

On the Atlantis, the Asians were kept in a mine cellar, and the Europeans in rooms below the lower deck, where the temperature was almost constantly around 30 degrees.

Both rooms were overcrowded and, despite the installation of additional fans, it was stuffy and hot, like in a stove. "It only gets hotter in hell," admitted one of the English.

Rogge, spitting on orders and instructions, allowed the prisoners to breathe fresh air on the upper deck as much as possible - sometimes for 8-12 hours a day. The prisoners had the worst of it when, sitting in the holds, they heard the thunder of guns, not having the slightest idea with whom the Atlantis was fighting. And if in this battle they drown him himself?

More promised the prisoners that in this case they would have equal opportunities with the crew to leave the ship. One of the English joked gloomily:

"We will be on the upper deck immediately when your trough turns upside down with a keel after a successful hit. Maybe you will make a hatch in the bottom, and give us the key?"

- What to do? Mor sighed. - You and I are in the same boat. Let's hope no one beats us.

- Well! the captive Captain Windsor did not believe. "Do you think that you will always be lucky?" Mark my word - sooner or later you will run into our cruiser, and you will be finished. True, I'm afraid that we, too.

The British prisoners were most depressing at the prospect of dying under the volleys of their native ships. When the Atlantis chased and fired on the prey, the prisoners, being locked up, knew nothing about who the Atlantis was fighting and how the battle was going, spending many restless hours in agonizing waiting.

Even if they could fall asleep in their stressful state, their sleep would be constantly interrupted by the roar of guns, the screech of howler monkeys and the clang of elevators feeding shells to guns through steel shafts that were laid through the premises where the prisoners were. In closed rooms, the thunder of guns resounded with a powerful electric discharge passed through the head. Lieutenant More decided to make life a little easier for the prisoners, informing them via broadcast that the raider's guns might soon start talking, but the target is a merchant ship so that they at least do not worry that the Atlantis itself has a chance to go to the bottom.

In early October, both the Germans and their captives were equally shocked to learn of the death of the Tyrranna, which was sent with a prize crew to one of the French ports controlled by the Germans.

It turned out that the captured Norwegian ship, on which most of the prisoners, including women and children from the Kimmendain liner, were transplanted, safely reached the Gironde, where it stopped in the outer roadstead, waiting for minesweepers to pass through the minefield. No one answered the Tyrranna's signals. Then Lieutenant Mund, who was in command of the ship, from the Atlantis prize crew, went ashore on a boat and reported on the arrival at the headquarters of the local naval district, which is part of the West Naval Group. There he was listened to without much interest and promised to send minesweepers tomorrow morning. In other words, the Tyrranna had to stand on an unguarded outer roadstead for another day.

The lieutenant knew that the English fleet was blockading the Gironde: British submarines were scouring the outer roadstead, and planes were even mining the mouth of the river. He brought this to the attention of the staff officer, who, laughing, replied: "Oh, don't worry, lieutenant, there are no British submarines in our area!"

Mundu had no choice but to return to the Tyrranna and wait for the promised minesweepers. In the morning the minesweepers did not arrive. Mund looked with hope and fear at the exit from the port.

Noon passed - there were no minesweepers. Later it turned out that the semi-battalion of minesweepers was in full readiness with raised pairs, waiting for the order to leave, but at the headquarters they simply forgot about it. Finally, someone remembered the Tyrranna, and the minesweepers received the long-awaited order to leave.

At the moment when the semi-sweeper division was leaving the port, the Tyrranna was sunk by three torpedoes fired from an English submarine. The most valuable goods that Rogge dreamed of delivering to Germany were lost, and about a third of the three hundred passengers - mainly women and children from the Kimmendein liner.

This happened on September 23, 1940, but this news did not reach Atlantis until October 20. And on October 22, 1940, Atlantis caught the Yugoslav steamer Durmitor in the southern part of the Indian Ocean - an old veteran with rusty, coal-smeared sides, a thin high pipe, loaded with something above all cargo marks.

The ship was built in 1912 in England and was then called "Plutarch". In the early 1920s, the ship was sold to the Yugoslavs and renamed the Durmitor. However, the meeting with this rusty collier on the Atlantis was considered a great success, since they intended to transfer to him most of the prisoners, whose number, after an unexpected meeting with the Commissar Remil, again reached three hundred people.

The prisoner quarters were already overcrowded. In addition, Atlantis could no longer feed such a large number of people, devastating its reserves at an incredible rate. Of course, the Durmitor could hardly be called the ship on which anyone would agree to voluntarily go on a sea voyage, but there was nothing better. 14 German sailors, led by Lieutenant Dannel, were supposed to guard the prisoners in the Yugoslav wreck. Fifteen people against three hundred prisoners, not counting the crew of the ship.

Parting words to the prisoners, More warned them not to do anything stupid - mines with a clockwork were laid under the bottom of the ship, and if something happened, the ship would be immediately flooded. "Durmitor" was supposed to be brought to Mogadishu, a Somali port controlled by allied Italians. According to calculations, the entire journey was to last 19 days.

But things didn't work out the way they had planned.

Firstly, it turned out that the Durmitor had much less coal than indicated in the senior engineer's payroll. And so much less that it was not possible to reach Mogadishu, as planned. In addition, there was a shortage of water and food on the ship, and the Atlantis, devastated by the prisoners, did not significantly help.
could.

Saving coal, Lieutenant Dannel went at a speed of 5 knots. The journey dragged on, and the ship ran out of food and water. All this was aggravated by the fact that the Durmitor was carrying a cargo of salt, which turned the life of both the convoy and the prisoners into a nightmare. Salt creaked on the teeth, corroded the skin and eyes. Hordes of rats and parasitic insects lived on the steamer. All the furniture, hatch covers and even deck boards were burned in the fireboxes. Sometimes they tried to set sail.

Suddenly pouring rain saved people from deadly thirst. Nevertheless, Dannel brought the ship to the Somali coast, having been on the road for 29 days instead of the planned 19.

Mogadishu was bombarded by British cruisers, and on November 22, Dannel threw the ship ashore near the small fishing village of Varsheikh.

The Italian soldiers who arrived, without understanding, declared everyone as prisoners of war, including Dannel and his sailors, loaded onto trucks and taken to Mogadishu, where everyone was escorted through the streets of the city as a sign of another "brilliant victory of the Romans over the barbarians."

Only two days later, Lieutenant Dannel managed to explain himself to the Italian military authorities. The Germans were released and told to get out of Somalia immediately, because they might cause the British to bombard Mogadishu again. The Durmitor was refloated by the Italians and brought to Mogadishu, where the ship was eventually captured by the British during their offensive in East Africa, and after the war was transferred back to Yugoslavia.

VI

Still not knowing anything about these events, on November 10, 1940, Atlantis launched a carrier-based seaplane into the air, which was discovered much north of the raider by the Norwegian tanker Ole Jacob. Having received the pilot's message, Rogge began to think about how to force the tanker into submission without resorting to force of arms.

Too valuable cargo was in its tanks, and in the event of shelling, the ship would immediately explode and burn. And all this could happen from a single projectile. After some thought, Rogge said:

- Let's make it simple. Let's turn into an English auxiliary cruiser and try to take the tanker with our bare hands. Let him just let us get closer.

The Atlantis received daily reconnaissance reports from Berlin, reporting the names of the British auxiliary cruisers and their areas of operation.

This information was not the result of the work of any secret agents, but the fruit of meticulous research by the department of deciphering enemy radio messages, carried out around the clock.

Although this information got to Atlantis with a delay of two or three weeks, but this, according to

at least it gave Rogge the opportunity to know in principle who was acting against him in the ocean at the present time. Therefore, they decided to temporarily rename Atlantis to Entenor, the presence of which in these waters was probably unknown to the Norwegian tanker.
known.

Lieutenant More was ordered to change into an English naval uniform, which he did. But after examining himself critically in the mirror, the young officer admitted that he looked more like a German in disguise than a real Royal Navy officer. Kamenets, glancing at Mor, chuckled and noticed that in the English fleet they wear caps and
pistol belts.

- It is unlikely that this masquerade will be able to deceive anyone, - said the navigator. Rogge examined Mor, laughed and waved his hand.

- Okay, it'll do. Go Mor.

A searchlight came on on the bridge of the Atlantis: "British Auxiliary Cruiser Entenor." Give me your call!"

There was a pause. Then, from the tanker, they somehow hesitantly answered: "Norwegian tanker Ole Jakob," and added shyly: Please do not follow me.

"Stop immediately!" Atlantis ordered. Negotiations by searchlights resembled the conversation of an elderly virgin, who is pestered by a stubborn stranger in the park at night.

"Why are you asking me to stop?" flashed Ole Jacob.

"I am an English auxiliary cruiser," replied the Atlantis.

But the "old maid" was not so easily persuaded.

The tanker's radio began transmitting the "QQQ" signal, the most disliked and feared signal on the Atlantis, immediately opening fire when it was on the air. But this time, Atlantis did not open fire. Instead, with the imperiousness of a Royal Navy warship, he again ordered the tanker to stop, turn off the radio and wait for an officer to relay secret instructions to the captain. The exchange of signals continued for several more minutes. Finally, the captain of the tanker was convinced. Radio signals stopped, the tanker slowed down and stopped, swaying on a dead swell.

More stepped into the boat, followed by two unarmed sailors. From the side it seemed that there was no one else in the boat, but seven more sailors were hiding under the tarpaulin, armed with machine guns, pistols and hand grenades.

The boat was approaching the tanker, and Lieutenant More, as never before, physically felt the suspicion and hostility emanating from the Norwegian vessel. Approaching the tanker, More saw that the gunners of the Norwegian ship were busy at the stern gun. Others, leaning over the gunwale, watched the approach of the boat.

Everything happened in complete silence. Nobody said a word. The silence was ominously hostile. Moore did not like all this very much - the Norwegians turned out to be very suspicious.

Instinctively, the lieutenant's hand reached for the holster of his pistol, but he controlled himself. If an ambush is prepared for them, then the gun will not help much. The cutter approached the side and a beam of light suddenly illuminated Mor's face, and a rough voice asked:

- Are you English?

More's answer was drowned out by the scraping of the boat's prow against the hull of the tanker. Mor looked around frantically, hoping to see the gangplank thrown overboard. But there was no ladder, which did not speak of anything good. A group of tanker officers had gathered at the rails in the middle of the ship, and Mor saw they were carrying rifles. For a few seconds the boat was rubbing against the side of the tanker's hull, when suddenly a wave picked it up and lifted it high enough for Mor to jump, grab the lower wire of the railing, pull himself up and find himself on the deck of the tanker in front of openly hostile Norwegian sailors.

Once on deck, Mort decided to act quickly and decisively. Throwing off his English tunic and showing his German uniform, he snatched a rifle from the nearest Norwegian and threw it overboard.

As often happens in war, Mohr's sudden and decisive actions paralyzed the Norwegians for a moment. This time was enough for the sailors to climb onto the deck and point their machine guns at the Norwegian sailors. As soon as this happened, More ran across the deck to the gangway leading to the bridge, shot up like a bullet to the captain, who silently watched what was happening on the deck. Before the breathless Mort could speak, the captain announced that he was surrendering. The tanker was captured intact without bloodshed.

After the crew surrendered, the Germans searched the tanker. Contrary to expectations, "Ole Jacob" did not have any fuel oil or diesel fuel in the tanks. His cargo consisted of several thousand tons of aviation alcohol. Of course, it was nice to deprive the enemy of such a delicacy, but this did not solve the problems of Atlantis. Along the way, it turned out that the alarms transmitted by the tanker, despite all attempts by the Atlantis radio operators to drown them, reached Colombo. Through the radio station "Ole Jacob" in Colombo, they reported that the alarm turned out to be false and the tanker continues to follow its course.

This not only satisfied the British in Colombo, but baffled Berlin, which reported in an official communiqué that the Indian Ocean was so tense that British merchant ships shied away from their own auxiliary cruisers. The next day, Atlantis caught another Norwegian tanker, whose name was Teddy.

The raider managed to approach the tanker almost 600 meters, after which a searchlight was transmitted from the Atlantis: "Immediately stop and identify yourself!"

"What would you like?" - requested from the tanker.

"I want to see you," Atlantis replied.

"Look around," the tanker agreed.

After some time, the tanker was asked: "Can we proceed further?"

"No," ordered the Atlantis, "wait for the lifeboat."

"Identify yourself," they finally demanded from the tanker.

"His Majesty's Ship Entenor," was transmitted from the Atlantis.

As a result, the crew of the Teddy was transferred to the Atlantis, and Lieutenant Fehler launched the tanker to the bottom with demolition charges.

As always, Fehler, who always liked to experiment, overdid it, and the explosion of the tanker

resembled the eruption of a large volcano, visible for tens of miles. Only Mor, who filmed the scene, enjoyed it.

The next morning, the Atlantis signalers found a huge plume of smoke directly ahead. Then a large, but, judging by the design, a very old ship appeared, heading straight for the Atlantis. A signal was raised on the raider, ordering to stop. Not responding to the signal, the ship continued to sail towards the Atlantis, which was forced to turn away to avoid a collision.

Taking up position behind the stern of the desperately smoking steamer, the Atlantis fired a warning shot.

If they sound the alarm now, Mort thought, it would be suicide.

And so it happened. Literally a couple of seconds after the warning shot, an alarm went on the air:

"RRR".

It was a bold folly...

- Open fire! Rogge ordered.

Shells flew into an ancient steamer with an antique long pipe. And at the same moment he opened fire back ... The name of the ship was "Automedon".

When Lieutenant More went up on her deck, he was surprised at the rout that the German shells had inflicted on the ship. The lieutenant had never seen anything like it. The entire deck was covered in rubble. The Automedon, which stood without a move, was desperately chatting on the swell; debris, mixed with the remains of torn hoses and cables, rolled from side to side. Steam whistled from broken steam lines. Shrapnel holes made the chimney look like a colander. Flames shot out of the broken radio room. The living deck partially collapsed. The hole was the size of barn doors, as if someone had opened a giant tin can with an equally gigantic

bayonet.

The blast wave scattered sandbags covering the gun and machine-gun posts. The contents of the bags spilled onto the deck, mixed with water, coal mud and life jackets scattered everywhere.

Lieutenant More climbed the remains of the ladder onto the dilapidated bridge, in the very center of which a shell from the Atlantis landed, killing all the officers who were there. Mort stumbled upon the first man killed at the entrance to the destroyed navigational cabin ...

After searching the ship, Lieutenant Mor, to his great surprise, discovered that this ancient steamer was entrusted with the transport of 15 bags of secret mail, which included hundreds of decryption tables, fleet orders, artillery instructions and naval intelligence reports. No one could understand why the British decided to send all this invaluable material on such an old trough as the Automedon, and did not load it on a warship. For an hour, wielding an ax, More tried to open the massive safe in the captain's cabin, but found nothing there but a million shillings in cash. The main prize was waiting for him in the wheelhouse among the six corpses of the officers who died there, somewhat explaining the tragic irony of the situation. Automedon was entrusted with top secret documents, which the officers were obliged to destroy, and, for sure, they would have done so if all six had not been instantly killed by one shell.

The prize was a long narrow envelope, kept in a green canvas bag with copper plaques to ensure that it would be flooded if it fell into the sea. It was written on the bag in big black letters:

"TOP SECRET. DESTROY IN THE EVENT OF A THREAT"

and on the envelope itself:

"To the Commander-in-Chief in the Far East in his own hands. Open in person.

VII

"Excellent, Mor," was all Captain 1st Rank Rogge could say after reading the contents of the top secret envelope. - Just great.

The envelope contained documents from the Office of Strategic Planning of the British War Cabinet containing detailed assessments of the state of the naval, air and ground forces of the British Empire in the Far East, Australia and New Zealand.

The most piquant was the long section on the possibility of Japan entering the war and, in connection with this, a detailed description of the fortifications of Singapore.

- Just wonderful! Rogge concluded.

The question arose of how to use these documents to the maximum advantage for Germany.

"We'll try to do it," Rogge promised. I see one way...

The Atlantis needed diesel fuel, and the Norwegian tanker Ole Jakob was filled with aviation alcohol.

Nearby neutral Japan had diesel fuel and needed aviation alcohol. And in order to avoid diplomatic complications, although Rogge did not foresee them, the German sailors were going to tease the Japanese with priceless documents captured from the enemy. Rogge called his navigator Kamenets.

"I want to entrust you with one delicate matter, Kamenets," said the commander of the Atlantis. "Take the Ole Jacob and head north to Japan. Find out everything else before sailing. The matter is not very complicated. Something like trading horses at the diplomatic level.

As Rogge predicted, there was nothing particularly difficult in this case. Kamenets led the Ole Jacob to Yokohama without incident.

After standing for several hours in this Japanese port, the Norwegian tanker weighed anchor and left in an unknown direction. At the same time, of course, no one found out that the captain of the 3rd rank Kamenets remained on the shore in the German embassy.

With the assistance of the German naval attache, Kamenets contacted the Japanese, who, having received part of the secret documents obtained by Atlantis, quickly organized the delivery of Kamenets to Vladivostok, on the territory of an almost allied Russia, bound with Germany by a friendship treaty.

From there, Kamenets made an enjoyable, and most importantly, completely safe, journey along the Trans-Siberian railway, arriving, as if on a magic carpet,

to Berlin along with the captured secret documents.

Unfortunately, Kamenz made his way back to Atlantis in less comfortable conditions.

A war began between Germany and the Soviet Union, and the Trans-Siberian route, of course, turned out to be closed for Kamenets. Therefore, the Atlantis navigator had to travel 16,000 miles in a submarine to return to his ship.

While Kamenets was enjoying the comfort of a Soviet international carriage compartment, another interesting example of political and economic interaction was demonstrated in a deserted bay in the southern Caroline Islands. There, Atlantis refueled with diesel fuel in exchange for aviation alcohol transferred to the Japanese.

"In miniature," Rogge remarked sagely, "this corresponds to Roosevelt's policy towards Britain.

Thus, Atlantis ended up in the Pacific Ocean, where the German auxiliary cruiser Komet, the fifth and last raider of the first wave, was still operating, aimed at acting on enemy sea lanes.

"Komet" appeared in the Pacific Ocean, as they say, "from the back door." The Russians were so kind that they led him along the Northern Sea Route, ignoring all protests from

English.

Abandoned by Soviet icebreakers at the entrance to the Bering Strait, the Komet independently made its way through a 700-mile strip of ice and entered the Pacific Ocean. There, disguised as a Japanese, the raider joined four auxiliary vessels of the Japanese fleet - military tankers - so much so that the Japanese themselves did not notice anything, and when they found out about it, they filed a protest.

The Komet was, as it were, surrounded by an aura of diplomatic incidents. Later, off the island of Nauru, the raider signaled Christmas greetings, then warned the people to go into hiding, and made a small bombardment of the English phosphate processing plant. This caused the strongest dissatisfaction of the Japanese, since phosphate development, officially owned by the British, was financed by the Japanese.

The neutral flag covers a huge amount of sins and produces no less number of surprises.

On the other hand, the Japanese were very grateful to the sailors of the Atlantis for delivering them secret English documents describing the fortifications of Singapore. They even rewarded Rogge with a ceremonial samurai sword. True, they did this after the fall of Singapore ...

In the meantime, the Atlantis crew faced a new problem. The ship was running out of fresh water. Nine months had passed since leaving Kiel, long enough to empty the water tanks. The Atlantis had a desalination plant, but it ran on coal, and all the coal available on the ship was used as ballast, and it could not be spent without violating the stability of the Atlantis.

Water was urgently needed every minute, but all 28 million square miles of the Indian Ocean could not provide the German sailors with a single drop of drinking water.

Something had to be done urgently.

Rogge and More began to rummage through atlases and reference books. Water could be taken from Prince Edward Island, but the difficult approaches to the island and the fog prevailing there made the whole enterprise very risky.

The islands of New Amsterdam and St. Paul were dangerous for another reason. They were located at the crossroads of the main shipping routes, and British cruisers constantly carried guard duty there. As a result, Rogge chose the islands of the Kerguelen archipelago, lying at 50 degrees south latitude. The islands had countless coves and fiords where one could easily hide. They were rarely visited by merchant ships. In the past, Norwegian whalers and sealers could be found there, but at present there was a high probability that the islands were uninhabited.

In addition, at one time these islands were perfectly explored by the German hydrographic vessel "Gazelle", and the "Atlantis" had the most detailed maps of the archipelago forgotten by God.

In early December, on the first Sunday of Advent, the Atlantis turned south, heading for a pinkish mist on the horizon.

In the southern hemisphere it was the height of summer, there was an unbearable tropical heat, the blue dome of heaven was not clouded by a single cloud. The ocean was mirrored, reflecting the rough contours of the Atlantis like a distorted mirror.

The indefatigable Lieutenant Mor hung on the board of orders a description of the Kerguelen archipelago and the history of its discovery. The archipelago bore the name of the greatest optimist of the past, Count Yves Joseph de Kerguelen-Tremares.

Commanding the French frigate Fortuna, the Earl is widely believed to have been the first to discover the Australian mainland; but he was so shocked by this circumstance that he did not land, but hurried back to France to gather a large expedition. But nothing came of the expedition, and the unfortunate count ended up in the Bastille, where he gave the islands that now bear his name the name "Archipelago of Despair".

Later, many tried to colonize the islands, but no one succeeded. People ruined their health and money, but somewhere after 1873 they left the archipelago alone. Whalers and sealers sometimes used the bays for recreation, but there was no permanent population on the islands.

As we approached the roaring forties, the weather, as it should be, began to deteriorate, but, in principle, the stormy latitudes received Atlantis this time quite peacefully, although the waves after the calm near the equator looked very impressive. The islands were covered with fog, a strong southwest wind was blowing. A combat alert was played on the Atlantis.

In the area of the islands, any surprises were likely. Once in the surf, the Atlantis sailed in a cloud of spray, protesting, according to Lieutenant More, with every rivet against approaching the island. Those free from the watch poured onto the upper deck. This was the first land they saw after leaving Germany.

In clouds of water spray and raging foam, a strip of coastal reefs surrounding these volcanic islands opened up. Gloomy hills and rocky plains seemed beautiful. After all, it was land! Rogge switched the engine telegraph to "stop", and the Atlantis thundered its anchor chain for the first time in 250 days. Before entering the lagoon, it was necessary to make sure that the British did not set up a radio station or an observation post here on the occasion of wartime.

More, accompanied by nine sailors, was supposed to land on the shore for carrying out

intelligence. In the event of a radio station being discovered, it was necessary to capture it with a surprise attack in order to disrupt the possibility of reporting to the whole world about the appearance of Atlantis in the waters of the archipelago. Mohr and his men disguised themselves in civilian clothes to pass as peaceful fishermen, and, to make a point, made their way to shore in a captured Norwegian longboat. Machine guns were hidden in the longboat under a tarpaulin, and pistols and hand grenades were hidden under the fishing uniforms.

Rogge wished Mor good luck with a signal lamp, and the longboat headed for the island. The sailors carefully peered into the shore: gray boulders, granite blocks, turning into gentle hills. Suddenly, the foreman, who was sitting next to Mort, squeezed the lieutenant's shoulder and whispered: "Someone is moving along the coast."

But it was too late to retreat. The longboat, rumbling with its engine, continued to move towards the shore, and the people in it were resolutely ready to spread hostilities almost to Antarctica. Rounding a small cape, the sailors saw a small valley with four or five huts at the foot of a high cliff. The huts stood out clearly against the rocks and the sky. These were not even huts, but small houses. One even had a veranda. There were lights in the windows. It seemed that a small Swiss village had somehow miraculously been transferred to Antarctica. Someone was clearly stirring at the water's edge, watching the approach of the longboat. One of the sailors took out a machine gun and aimed it at this moving target, which was moving uncertainly, like a drunk or crazy man, back and forth between the houses and the water's edge. Finally, the "drunkard" was considered. It was a large sea lion! The machine guns were hidden, and soon the launch reached the shore.

Having jumped out of the longboat, the sailors, in some kind of intoxication, ran along the shore, inhaling the smell of the earth and unusually feeling a solid, unswaying support under their feet. The smell of the earth corroded the nostrils, making all movements and emotions completely uncontrollable, which is familiar only to sailors who have returned from a long voyage. After regaining consciousness, Mort and his men searched several nearby huts, where they found nothing but old barrels of whale oil and miscellaneous rubbish accumulated over the years. Then the sailors from the Atlantis went to the houses that stood at the foot of a sheer cliff.

The house, which had a veranda, was much larger than the others. The door was half rotten, and as for the light in the windows, it was an illusion caused by the play of light and shadow. Opening the door, the sailors saw a spacious room with a solid stove. There was a table and a couple of chairs in the middle of the room, and an antique lamp hung from the ceiling. The whole setting clearly belonged to the last century. It was all the more surprising to see on the walls photographs of half-dressed and voluptuously smiling girls, cut out from the calendar of 1936! The date was even marked - November 8th. An overprint on the calendar indicated that it was inherited from a French ship that arrived from Tamatava, the main port of Madagascar.

There were many empty bottles lying around, whose labels left no doubt about the nationality of the last visitors to the island. There was half a loaf of bread on the table, which, due to the peculiarities of the local climate, although stale, was quite suitable for eating. Through the window, the remains of a wire fence were visible, where, perhaps, there had once been a corral for cattle. In another room stood a huge bed with a massive headboard made of bent copper pipes. Such beds were in vogue in the late 60s of the last century.

Two mummified pigs were lying near the house - also due to the peculiarities of the local climate. After searching a few more huts, Mort reported to the Atlantis via portable radio: "The village is uninhabited. There are no traces of the English."

"Return to the ship immediately," Rogge ordered.

Back on board the raider, Mort reported the situation to the commander, and they began to think about how to get a ship of the size of the Atlantis into the lagoon of the island. A long channel with a width of just over 500 meters led into the lagoon. It was decided to measure the depths from the boats and set the fairway milestones. The results of these works showed that the depths of almost the entire length of the channel were 20 meters. The fairway was covered with a width of 100 meters.

They decided to enter the lagoon the next morning at high tide. When the Atlantis began to weigh anchor in the morning, everything seemed to be conducive to the fulfillment of the task: the sea was calm, the wind had died down, the channel was clearly and clearly marked. It seemed that going into the lagoon would not be difficult.

At low speed, Atlantis began to move, keeping between the milestones and buoys that marked the fairway. The ship drifted a little to the left, but with the help of the rudder and cars, it was quickly returned to its course.

For a fraction of a second, Lieutenant More did not understand what had happened. He felt a slight push, he swayed and he heard someone cry:

We've run into something!

Then someone else shouted:

It's an underwater reef! We are on the rocks!

The bottom of the Atlantis creaked against the underwater rock, the ship trembled and vibrated along its entire length. And it happened right in the center of the channel, where the depth gauges promised complete safety.

Rogge turned the engine telegraph to full astern, trying to get the Atlantis off the reef. Nothing succeeded. The ship continued to shake from keel to klotik. The killing screech continued. Mort physically felt the sharp reef sinking deeper and deeper into the belly of the ship like a dagger. Rogge asked the engine room if they were receiving water. From there they reported that there was no leak, but after a few minutes they reported that sea water was entering the forward fresh water tank. This meant that the reef had broken through the double bottom of the Atlantis and damaged the tank.

In other words, the worst thing that could have happened has happened. Rogge worked desperately with the machine telegraph, giving either "Full Astern", then "Full Forward", then "Full Astern", but there was no effect; on the contrary, with each reverse of the engines, the ship landed more firmly on the reef.

Dropped a diver. He reported on a huge hole and a reef as sharp as a needle, on which the Atlantis sat as if on a spit. The reef was about two meters wide. He pierced the bottom of the ship about three meters from the stem, penetrating into the forepeak. "Hopeless," the diver made his diagnosis. "Absolutely hopeless."

An unpleasant chill seized everyone on the bridge. Dropped the lot. The depth on the left side was 20 meters, on the right side it was the same. The reef was right along the diametrical plane of the ship.

Rogge, however, refused to consider the diver's sentence final. Dressed in diving equipment, the commander of the Atlantis himself went under the water and returned, as always overwhelmed with optimism.

"It's not as bad as it could be," Rogge announced. "We'll save the ship."

Anchors were raised from bow and stern. Rogge calculated, by picking up the anchor chains with both capstans and at the same time reversing the machine at full speed, to rock and lift the Atlantis so that the blade of the reef came out of the ship's wound. But absolutely nothing came of it. The ship didn't move an inch.

"All right," said Rogge, "let's try another way."

After reviewing the data on tidal levels, Rogge ordered the forecaster to move ashore to synchronize work aboard the Atlantis with the peak of the tidal waves.

In the meantime, an emergency was announced on the ship: it was necessary to reload everything that was possible from bow to stern, and thereby lighten the bow of the Atlantis. Cursing fate, which turned out to be so unkind to them on Christmas Eve, the crew began this hard labor. From the bow, everything was overloaded - from shells and bags with ballast to cables and mops from the boatswain's economy. We waited for the tide and again tried to withdraw from the reef.

The exhausted people were seized with despair. But Rogge did not lose optimism. He ordered to flood the stern mine cellar to increase the load on the stern, but the ship continued to sit on this damned reef. The board of directors met. Someone suggested pumping some of the fuel overboard to lighten the ship. Rogge refused - the fuel was too precious cargo; There was a war going on and it had to be continued. Then the bomber Fehler suggested blowing up the reef. No one was particularly enthusiastic about this proposal - the explosion could cause even worse damage to the ship than the reef itself did. No one else could come up with anything, and this put the crew of the Atlantis in front of a very gloomy prospect: either to spend the rest of the war on Kerguelen, or behind barbed wire in a prisoner of war camp.

Of course, there was still the theoretical possibility of calling in some other German raider to help, but, not to mention how humiliating it was, there was very little chance of contacting another raider without the British finding out about it.

During the night the wind picked up and soon reached gale force.

Frozen on the "dog" watch, Mor felt that the wind-driven wave began to rock the Atlantis, which was sitting lifelessly on an underwater reef. To the noise of the wind and waves was added the grinding sound of stone on the torn skin of the bottom of the ship. The reef itself seemed to be making an effort to free itself from the weight of the Atlantis.

More quickly realized what had happened. The storm wind blowing on the starboard side of the ship made it rotate on the reef around its axis, like a weather vane. On the one hand, this state of affairs created an additional danger, since the reef could cause even more damage to the bottom of the ship; but, on the other hand, it provided another chance to get off the cliff.

Without hesitation, Mor woke the commander, who was resting in his cabin, through the speaking tube, and asked him to come up to the bridge. By this time, the wind and waves had turned the Atlantis almost 90 degrees, exposing the stern to the wind. Having given up the stern anchor, it was possible to fix the ship in this position, i.e., stern into the wind. At the same time, they gave the car a move forward. The stern, held by the anchor, sank, raising the bow of the ship higher and higher.

With a terrible screech of friction between granite and steel, the ship tried to turn around the axis of the reef again, but, held by the stern anchor, it rose, crawling with its entire mass onto the reef. Finally, a thunderous crack and a sudden list showed that the Atlantis had slipped

from the reef. By this time, everyone was so exhausted that the release of the Atlantis did not cause any noisy manifestations of joy. In addition, everyone was well aware that the ship had received serious damage, and it remains to be seen how everything will go from there.

Indeed, with a hole in the bottom, thrown in all directions by storm waves, being in a channel whose width was only a little more than the length of its hull, Atlantis could land on the reef at any moment. The stern anchor was torn off, the bow anchors were selected.

Visibility dropped to almost zero: the nearby shore was practically invisible. Lotmen stood at the bow and stern, constantly measuring the depths and reporting this to the bridge. "Ten fathoms! Eight fathoms! Six fathoms!"

More stood at the engine telegraph, listening to the commander's orders. In less than four hours after the ship had been taken off the reef, More had sent more than two hundred orders to the machine. Finally, happily avoiding all dangers, the Atlantis entered the lagoon and anchored. The noise of the chain of the given anchor somewhat brought Lieutenant More to himself. He leaned against the bulkhead and whispered a prayer of thanksgiving.

Now it was necessary to think about how to repair the hole in the bottom of the ship in this God-forsaken wilderness. No wonder the count-discoverer called the archipelago the Islands of Despair. Despair began to cover the entire crew of the Atlantis. Everyone had a premonition of some kind of tragedy. And, as always, the sailors' premonition turned out to be correct. A young machinist, senior sailor Herman, who worked on the chimney and fell off the cradle due to a burst end, tragically died.

The sailor was buried on the shore by the whole crew. Apparently, it was the southernmost German military grave in World War II.

All this was very unfortunate, but the war continued, forcing them to solve the problems that menacingly faced the crew of the Atlantis. When the ship was finally able to get into the inner lagoon of the island, the sailors experienced a feeling of incredible relief. "Atlantis" was camouflaged against the background of coastal cliffs. Signalmen and artillery observers were posted on the tops of the hills. All sectors where the enemy could suddenly appear were carefully calculated and targeted. Any ship that appeared in the waters of the island had to be clearly projected against the background of the sea and the horizon. He would be met by a hail of shells, and the potential enemy would not even understand where these shells were coming from. Thus, the problem of safe stay in the waters of the island was solved.

It remained to solve an even more important problem: how to close up a hole in the bottom caused by an underwater reef. The hole in the bottom measured 2x6 meters, resembling, according to the diver, a barn gate. The cladding sheets were pressed inward almost at a right angle.

Two volunteers, who were once construction workers, undertook to stop the leak in the forepeak. They went down to the forepeak, taking with them several sacks of cement, sand, and shingles, and a large box of provisions. Behind them, the entrance hatch was battened down and compressed air was supplied to the forepeak to displace water from the room and open access to the hole. Volunteers spent two days in the compartment, waiting for the concrete to harden. The flow of water into the forepeak stopped, and, as the tests showed, the delivered patch patch perfectly restrained the external water pressure. After that, two divers with underwater cutters of the latest model went overboard and cut off the steel tatters that had formed around the hole. Against the background of these works and sadness over the death of the senior sailor Herman, the Christmas meeting was modest and not very

funny. The raid dragged on, people were mortally tired, many were overwhelmed by nostalgia for their home and the families left there. In addition, in the midst of the celebration of Christmas, a hurricane blew again. I had to wind up additional anchors and double the watch. The next morning, Mohr went ashore with a group of nine sailors on a mission to find a source of drinking water. The source was discovered quickly. It turned out to be a rather powerful waterfall on one of the rocks. To supply water from the waterfall to the ship, a pipeline had to be built from fire and receiving hoses a little over a kilometer long. It wasn't particularly difficult. The pipeline descended along a gentle slope to a flat part of the coast, and from there it was led to the anchorage of the Atlantis.

Within two days, more than a thousand tons of fresh drinking water entered the ship's tanks. Having finished all the work, the Atlantis weighed anchor and began to go to sea at low speed through the same ill-fated channel. This time there were no incidents, and the Atlantis was again on the high seas.

A few hours later, the coast of the island melted on the horizon, and a few days later the bright tropical sun shone again over the Atlantis, which headed for the Seychelles.

VIII

In early January 1941, Atlantis captured two more British steamships, the Speybank and the Mandasore. The Mandasore was sunk, and the Speybank was taken as a prize. Rogge intended to send him to Germany. Soon the Atlantis received a top secret message from the distant Berlin Admiralty that they were about to rendezvous with the pocket battleship Admiral Scheer. So far, only two people knew about this - Rogge himself and More. A meeting on the open ocean, deep behind enemy lines, with another German ship is such a rare and joyful event that Rogge considered it necessary somehow

Mark.

- How? Mor asked.

"By capturing another English ship," replied the insatiable Rogge.

Mort smiled: even the ancients said that desire is the mother of all thoughts. Rogge's wish came true. On February 2, Atlantis's signalers spotted the Norwegian tanker Ketty Brovig. For all the ordeals, fate delivered a tanker to them just in time, when Atlantis and Sheer were in dire need of fuel.

When capturing the tanker, Rogge wanted to achieve complete surprise, and therefore decided to attack at night. By this time, in order to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, the Atlantis had come up with a new way of psychologically influencing the enemy. A huge banner was hung overboard, on which was written in large letters in English:

STAY! DO NOT USE THE RADIO!

At night, this banner was suddenly illuminated, exerting a magical effect on the captains of English ships. True, not at all. But in the case of the Katty Brovig, Rogge hoped that her captain would have the sense to comply, since one shell from the Atlantis could turn the tanker into a fiery furnace where the entire crew would be roasted.

- Do not shoot! Rogge ordered as the Atlantis crept up to

tanker.— Give a warning and illuminate the banner.

There was a command: "Turn on the backlight!", And Atlantis sparkled like the Sports Palace in Berlin on the days of international competitions.

A warning shot rang out, and the angry voice of the senior gunner immediately rang out:

"What have you done, you idiot!" You hit her in the pipe!

A cloud of steam began to rise over the Ketty Brovig. The ship came to a halt with commendable speed. On the Atlantis, they waited tensely for several seconds for the tanker to explode. But nothing happened. For some reason, there was no explosion or fire.

More jumped into the boat and ordered to get off. The lieutenant thought about how pleasant it was to board a tanker, where even one carelessly thrown match was guaranteed to end everyone in a fiery hell. Mora's thoughts were prompted by a picture of the members of the tanker's crew throwing themselves overboard. If they jump overboard, they probably know why.

The first person Mort met when he climbed onto the deck of the tanker was a Chinese sailor who emerged from the darkness.

What is the name of your ship? Mort asked, heading for the ladder leading to the bridge.

Horror shone in the Chinese's slanting eyes at the sight of Mort. He ran to the rails, climbed over them and jumped into the water. "God! Mort thought, do I really look so scary?"

Shining a flashlight, he himself read the name of the tanker on one of the life buoys. After searching the captain's cabin, More found the ship's papers, from which he learned that the tanker was carrying 4,500 tons of diesel fuel and 6,000 tons of other types of fuel. It was even hard to dream of a better one!

Pestilence returned to the Atlantis, picking up the floundering Chinese along the way. After listening to his report, Rogge decided to keep the prize at any cost. To do this, More, Fehler and the Chinese had to return to the tanker, which none of them wanted at all.

Back on the Ketty Brovig, Mohr called a council of war. In complete darkness, relieved only by Mort's flashlight, he, Fehler, the tanker captain, and his chief engineer sat down at a round table.

The tanker was without power, there was no light. This happened thanks to the ill-fated projectile fired from the Atlantis. As a result, the pressure in the boilers dropped.

"Fill the boilers with fresh water," Mor suggested to the captain of the tanker.

"It won't work," the Norwegian mechanic shook his head. We don't have hand pumps.

- And how do you raise steam in the port? Mor asked.

"We are provided from the shore," the mechanic replied.

- Very strange! - the German sailors had nothing more to say.

"You will be convinced," the mechanic promised, "that this is not the last oddity of our ship.

And although the Germans tried to put some of their ideas into practice, they were convinced that the senior tanker mechanic was right - a very strange design of water tanks did not

Possibility to pour water into the boilers while at sea. Then they tried to save the small amount of steam that still remained in the boilers.

One of the sailors of the Atlantis, wrapped in wet blankets, volunteered to climb into a red-hot cloud and shut off the main valve of the steam pipeline. Another sailor stood ready to take his place if the first one fainted or died. But the first volunteer returned safely and collapsed unconscious on the deck. The silence that followed was proof of his success, the shrill whistle of the escaping steam stopped. The remaining steam in the boilers was raised using all the furniture that could be found on the tanker as fuel.

When More returned to the Atlantis, the raider with three ships astern (the third was the German ship Tannenfels, which arrived from Somalia) was on its way to the rendezvous point with the Scheer.

The crew did not know anything about the meeting between the Atlantis and the Admiral Scheer, and when the signalman shouted that he saw a mast on the horizon, which, apparently, belongs to a warship, Rogge, winking at Mor, ordered to sound the combat alarm. Everyone looked at Rogge with surprise and fear. Why is the Atlantis going straight for the warship? Is Rogge crazy? Or maybe he decided to become a suicide? The tension on the Atlantis lasted until the signalman, in a voice breaking with excitement, shouted: "This is one of our pocket battleships!"

For the crew of the Scheer, the appearance of the Atlantis was just as unexpected, since they expected to see one ship, but met four! Rogge proudly passed his prizes past the Admiral Scheer.

After exchanging the usual salutatory signals, the Atlantis approached the starboard side of her "big brother". Against the background of the armored pocket battleship with its three-gun main battery turrets, the Atlantis seemed like a peaceful, chubby huckster. At the time of the meeting of the ships in the ocean, a severe storm was raging with a force of at least 11 points. From the Scheer they transmitted by semaphore that they understand everything and do not expect guests until the weather improves. After reading this signal, Rogge announced: "I'm going to the Scheer."

The commander of the Atlantis was confident in the captured Norwegian longboats, which had shown themselves more than once in stormy conditions. However, some, including More, wanted to visit the Scheer so much that they were ready to swim to the pocket battleship. Waves as high as a three-story house were coming towards the longboat, but, skillfully maneuvering, the sailors of the Atlantis managed to get to the Admiral Scheer, where they were warmly received, although the terrible turbulence did not make it possible to fully take advantage of the hospitality of the crew of the pocket battleship. As a result, Mor "got lost" on the Scheer, and Rogge returned to the Atlantis without waiting for the adjutant. When the ability to think returned to More, he was terribly afraid that some accident would tear the Atlantis from the Scheer, and he would remain on the pocket battleship forever. But everything worked out.

Both ships descended 300 miles to the south, where the sea was calm, after which a constant exchange of visits and gifts began. Selected foremen and sailors of the Atlantis went on a visit to the Scheer, and a group of sailors from the pocket battleship visited the Atlantis.

Many, especially old-timers and re-enlistees, were familiar from the old days when they served on the same ship or in the same unit. Both crews sincerely tried to outdo each other in the exchange of gifts, especially since these gifts cost neither Atlantis nor Scheer anything. Atlantis sent each member of the Scheer crew a beautiful fountain pen as a gift. From the Scheer they reported that among their booty there were also thousands of fountain pens!

Before meeting with the Atlantis, the Scheer captured the British refrigerator Duquies at sea with a load of several million chicken eggs. From his generosity, the commander of the Scheer, Captain 1st Rank Kranke, allocated 150,000 eggs to Atlantis. For two weeks, the sailors of the Atlantis and their prisoners gorged themselves on eggs that had not been seen for many months. Eggs were boiled soft-boiled, in a bag, hard-boiled, all kinds of scrambled eggs were fried, omelettes and eggnog were prepared. However, soon, when there were still about 14,000 eggs on board, no one could look at them without bouts of nausea. And Rogge ordered the remaining eggs to be thrown overboard.

By that time, all the planned work on board had been completed and it was time to say goodbye.

The priceless "Ketty Browig" fueled the "Scheer", "Atlantis" and the ship "Tannenfels". There is no doubt that the capture of the Norwegian tanker was a great success. Meanwhile, Atlantis was given a new task: to rendezvous with the Italian submarine Perla at sea and refuel it.

The boat left Massawa, and the meeting with her was scheduled at 35 degrees south latitude. The Atlantis arrived exactly on time, but there was no boat. Annoyed, Rogge muttered curses as the Atlantis circled the area aimlessly, hours ticking by and patience running out. But then the Italian boat suddenly appeared on the air.

It turns out that she got lost and asks Atlantis for its position and bearing. Rogge exploded in indignation at Italian carelessness.

Any enemy ship could intercept these signals and suddenly appear on the scene at the moment of a substantive manifestation of the solidarity of the Axis countries, when the Atlantis pumped seven tons of diesel fuel into the submarine. The boat commander boarded the Atlantis, where he loudly admired the unsurpassed successes of the raider, and in the end got up the nerve and begged Rogge for 70,000 cigarettes!

Rogge parted with the Italian submarine with joy, but the parting of the Atlantis with the Scheer was sad, as always happens with people who do not know if they will meet again, since there is no guarantee that they will even live to see the next morning. After the departure of the Scheer, the sailors of the Atlantis felt even more alone than before. From the powerful battleship breathed such reliability that it seemed as if they were not at the end of the world in the rear of the enemy, but on the inner roadstead of the naval base in Kiel. But for those who were called to the Atlantis from the merchant fleet, the sight of the "chief" did not cause any melancholy.

"You will die from the heat on these battleships," the reservists joked. "The Atlantis is many times more comfortable and pleasant. And there even captains of the 3rd rank live three in a cabin!

Now something had to be done with the squadron that Atlantis was leading. Rogge decided to send the Speybank to Germany, appointing Lieutenant Schneidewind, the former chief officer from the Tannenfels ship, which came from Somalia, as the captain of the captured steamer. The captain of the ship protested noisily when the first mate was requisitioned from him, but Rogge referred to the laws of war.

In May, the Speybank reached Bordeaux, was renamed the Doggerbank and converted into a minelayer. In early 1942, under the command of the same Lieutenant Schnee-dewind, Doggerbank went to sea with the task of laying mines on the approaches to Cape Town.

With a lot of adventures, changing names and flags, Doggerbank reached Cape Town, laid mines there and moved on, finally arriving in Yokohama, where then

there was also a German auxiliary cruiser "Thor".

Only one person from the crew of the Doggerbank escaped. All the rest, trying to escape in a single boat, drifted for a long time in the open sea. Some shot themselves, others, having gone mad, threw themselves overboard, and the rest died right in the boat from thirst and the scorching rays of the sun.

The sailors of the Atlantis found out about this when they were already in Germany.

In February and March 1941, Atlantis operated on the approaches to the Mozambique Strait, and in April again entered the ocean.

On April 17, in the western part of the horizon, signalmen in the "crow's nest" of the Atlantis discovered the ship, and the raider, changing course, went to approach his new victim. Soon the signalmen clearly saw a four-masted steamer, the silhouette of which was slowly rising on the horizon.

We attack at dawn! Rogge ordered.

Rogge's method of attacking at dawn had already been used, but this time there was some innovation in the method. Rogge decided to abandon the warning shots, which made it possible for the ship under fire to report the location of the Atlantis by radio, and immediately open fire to kill until the enemy surrendered or was sunk.

The four-masted steamer sailed completely darkened, carrying no flag. Four years ago, while in England at a sailing regatta in honor of the coronation of King George VI, Rogge saw these ships - the liners of the company "Bibi" - and knew that they were used as auxiliary cruisers or troop transports.

The first salvo of the Atlantis fell short, the second overshot, the third shattered the radio room, the fourth hit the deck of the ship, causing a fire. There was no return fire, which was very unusual for the British. The Atlantis continued to fire for nine minutes, until the ship signaled: "Cease fire!" The guns fell silent. The Atlantis came closer to the burning ship, and from the bridge of the raider, to their great horror, they saw a crowd of women and children on the deck of the steamer, huddled in one nightclothes at the bulwark. Other passengers ran out onto the deck in a panic. Auxiliary cruiser?! Troop transport?! What the hell is this?! It turned out that this was the Egyptian liner Zamzam, on which there were 138 citizens of the United States, mostly women and children!

"Second Louisiana!" Mort thought, numb with horror, well aware of the howl that would now rise in the American press about the "ineradicable barbarism of the Huns," and how the United States could use this incident to further its plans to enter the war against Nazi Germany.

Meanwhile, the liner launched boats, into which Arab sailors began to crowd, completely forgetting about the passengers.

"Give me the gun," Rogge growled furiously, pounding the bridge railing with his fist, "I'll shoot that bastard!"

The wrath of the commander of the Atlantis was directed at the Arab sailor, who used the mooring line thrown into the boat to climb onto the deck of the raider, considering this end as a personal invitation to board. Fortunately, Rogge did not have
pistol.

"Get him out of my sight!" the commander of the Atlantis continued to rage, "otherwise I will throw

him back overboard!

The Arab was removed from the ship, and only now from the bridge they noticed the flag of the liner, hoisted at the stern after the first shots of the Atlantis. It was the flag of Egypt.

It turned out that the liner was sold to Egypt on the eve of the war and was not carrying troops, as was believed on the Atlantis, but 202 civilian passengers, among whom women and children predominated. Women, saving their children, floundered in the water, and half-empty boats with fleeing sailors continued to roll away from the liner.

When More arrived aboard the Zamzam, he was greeted by the elderly British captain, William Gray Smith, whose English restraint quelled a tide of indignation at the actions of the Atlantis.

Why didn't you signal us earlier? Mort asked, bewildered. "What were you waiting for?" So that we all smeared, smashed to shreds?

"It happened because," the English captain replied coldly, "because your first shell smashed our signal searchlight.

The captain still held the flashlight with which he had managed to stop the Atlantis from firing.

Next to the captain stood a young Egyptian cadet, the only one who did not panic and was ready, if necessary, to share the fate of the ship with his captain. From a conversation with Captain Smith, More learned that among the passengers of the liner were one hundred missionary priests of twenty denominations, 76 women, of whom five were pregnant, and 35 children, some barely out of infancy. On board were also a group of American doctors, very photogenic Greek nurses, elderly English women - the wives of officers and one French woman. The women and children who arrived on the Atlantis were barely dressed.

Rogge signaled to Fehler and Mohr to go through the cabins and collect as many women's and children's clothes as possible. The officers were not at all happy about the new "introductory". "Zamzam" was already standing with a strong roll and could roll over at any moment. But they still managed to collect some clothes and baby food.

Some passengers, once on the Atlantis, were sure that the Germans would destroy them all in order to hide the traces of the crime. More reassured them, explaining that it was easier to do it with 150mm guns than to kill anyone on board.

Fortunately, there were few such passengers. Others had more life-affirming concerns.

Two young American women ran up to Mort.

"We are sure that you speak English," they chattered. "Tell me, is it possible to get oranges on your ship?"

More coughed.

Oranges?! "It will soon be a year since he himself last saw oranges in the hold of the captured Tyrranna.

The lieutenant announced to the disappointed Americans that he could not help them in any way.

The deck of the Atlantis was filled with rescued passengers and their belongings. many more

were in shock, frightened children cried loudly.

Three seriously injured passengers were brought to the Atlantis infirmary. One of them was the leader of a group of American doctors. A fragment of a shell tore his muscles to pieces.

leg.

Among the passengers were several very famous personalities. In particular, among the rescued was John Murphy, publisher of Fortune magazine, as well as Dr. Grafhunter, the former chief surveyor of India. While transcribing the passengers, Lieutenant More saw one of them being seized by two armed guards.

- What's happened? Mort asked as he approached them.

"This man took pictures of everything around," the guard reported, handing Mort a camera as material evidence.

- What is your last name? More asked the passenger, who looked quite frightened.

— Sherman. David Sherman, he replied.

- Who you are? Mor continued the interrogation irritably. — Missionary, doctor or what?

The detainee smiled faintly.

- No. I am a photographer from Life magazine.

More, being an avid amateur photographer, knew the name.

Sherman from Life magazine! At one time, More admired his work and never thought that fate would bring them together like this. Taking the device from the surprised escort, he gave it to the photographer, and together they took several pictures of the death of the Zamzam liner (Double Sam, as the Americans called it). The liner sank quickly and beautifully, as if rejoicing that it was leaving all earthly worries.

Later, when all the captured Americans were transferred to the Dresden blockade breaker, with which Atlantis met specifically for this purpose, Sherman's camera was nevertheless confiscated.

However, the Life photographer managed to save the cassette, on which, which Mor did not suspect, there were several shots of the Atlantis taken from the side - either from a sinking liner, or from boats.

The photograph of the raider was quickly handed over to the British command, which made it much easier for the British to detect and identify the German raider. More learned about this only after the war, realizing late that in a war one should not violate instructions and instructions, in accordance with one's own likes and dislikes.

IX

Violating another instruction, Lieutenant More kept a diary. This, fortunately, did not lead to any sad consequences.

Like any officer called up from the reserve, Lieutenant Mor believed that all kinds of instructions descended from high headquarters were written by idiots who created the appearance

activities at the desks of their cozy Berlin offices. Despite the huge workload in the service, More still managed to enter into a notebook the events of their unprecedented cruising.

It is fortunate for historians that in the course of a big secret operation of any war, among the harsh and rude military professionals, there is always one, as a rule, a junior officer who managed to get a university education even before the war, and therefore experienced the torment of a scientist about potential "blank spots" future history.

"Only on May 19, just a day before the crew and passengers of the Zamzam liner set foot on the land of occupied France, did the British officially announce that the Zamzam liner was late," Lieutenant More noted in his notes and continued: We the Atlantis had no illusions whatsoever about the possible consequences of our mistake when a passenger, almost neutral liner, was mistaken by us for a British auxiliary cruiser and sunk by artillery fire opened without warning.

No doubt the British had to take extra measures to search and destroy us, and therefore we tried at full speed to get away from this area. Just two days after the transfer of the passengers of the liner to the Dresden, I was awakened in the middle of the night by the calls of the combat alarm. Struggling with sleep, I phoned the bridge. "Two ships have been discovered," they answered from the watch.

"Two ships? I thought, dressing quickly and jumping out of the cabin. "It could be a transport and a warship escorting it; but it could be two warships!"

Either way, this does not bode well for us. Rogge was already on the bridge and was talking about something with the watch officer.

"We couldn't find a better time," the commander joked gloomily.

The Atlantis stood motionless, swaying on the ocean swell. The ship was carefully darkened, and absolute silence reigned over it. But it was no longer the silence of sleep, but the silence of complete readiness.

In the eyepieces of night binoculars, I saw two shadows that increased in size, acquiring outlines. There could be no mistake - the pyramidal superstructures clearly indicated that these were warships. They were heading straight for us with great speed!

My dream was taken away as if by hand; the head became completely clear - completely unknown mechanisms of self-preservation worked in the body. Quite automatically, I began to calculate the distance, the speed of approach, and our chances of going unnoticed, which seemed insignificant.

Up to this point, the night had been fairly dark by South Atlantic standards. But right now, behind the approaching ships, the moon emerged from behind the clouds, illuminating us like a searchlight. True, the moonlight gives rise to a very complex play of shadows in the night sea and, rather, prevented the enemy signalers than helped. In the light of the moon, Atlantis merged even more with the surface of the ocean.

Reports from combat posts flooded the bridge: "Weapon No. 1 is ready. Gun number 2 is ready. Gun number 3 is ready. Torpedo tubes are ready for battle!"

"Start the car!" - ordered Rogge, but we did not dare to move immediately, fearing that we would be betrayed by a white wake astern. Slowly and carefully, we began to step aside.

I looked through the binoculars again and felt myself sweating all over.

No! It couldn't be true. I must have been wrong. But someone next to me, who was also looking through binoculars, whistled and said: "We finished the game! Next stop is heaven!"

Looking at Rogge's face, I realized that I was right. There were only two ships in the world that even remotely resembled the silhouettes of those that were heading straight for us. These were the giant battleships Nelson and Rodney! And behind them was a steel monster, which was even easier to identify, at least in terms of class. It was an attack aircraft carrier! And this armada of armored monsters was heading straight for us.

Perhaps they have already seen and identified us and are closing in to destroy the Atlantis with their secondary caliber artillery without wasting costly 406mm rounds on a puny target like us. Perhaps they noticed us, but did not identify us yet? Then we have a chance to live an extra 10-11 minutes while they ask us for a secret call sign and make sure that we do not know it.

Resistance would be useless. Our 150-mm projectiles are more harmless than peas for these giants. All we had to do was prepare to go into the abyss with a proudly raised flag.

I even chuckled, thinking what a poem our Ministry of Propaganda would write about this. Gritting our teeth, we continued to wait for the request, which we were unable to answer, and the volley that was to follow.

But fortune continued to count us among its favorites. The aircraft carrier passed so close to us that we could clearly see the seething jet from the work of its propellers. So close that there was a threat of collision.

We didn't understand what was happening. Of course, we thought, they couldn't help but notice us. Maybe they want to somehow subtly play cat and mouse with us? But the English armada went its own way and disappeared into the darkness. Only a few minutes later, a simple thought reached us: they simply DIDN'T notice us!

Although the tension subsided, we could not believe it for a long time. Rogge ordered full speed to get out of the area as quickly as possible. And, as always happens in such cases, a whole sheaf of sparks suddenly fell from our pipe.

"Well, now we're definitely covered!" I thought.

But again everything worked out. Second miracle in one night! I can honestly say that for me these 15 minutes were the most stressful of our entire voyage. I got really scared...

During the raid, we had all sorts of interesting cases. One night we found, at a great distance, the navigational lights of a steamer, and behind them a series of other lights flashing in the darkness. We asked for their nationality and everything became clear. It was a French convoy bound for Indochina, escorted by a flotilla of submarines.

To confuse them, we sent back: "Bon Voyage. Viva la France!" and disappeared into the darkness. A piquant situation arose once on a Swiss steamer, which I boarded for a routine check. The ship's papers were in order, and so was the cargo. The captain of the ship was always somehow uneasy. I soon realized what was the matter. It turns out that, as I found from the found form of the radiogram, the ship was already ready to broadcast the "Q" signal.

"What is it, captain?" I asked reproachfully.

The captain hastily tore up the form and, with a friendly smile, handed me a bottle of Scotch. Big bottle, you can trust me!

On January 27, we discovered a large liner, which we identified as the Queen Mary. One of the prisoners confirmed our assumption, but added with a smile that we should not be upset.

Under all circumstances, the liner would not have become our prey. Firstly, he is well armed, and secondly, he does not go anywhere without two escort cruisers. We knew about this and, not being suicides, immediately took to their heels, regretting only that the liner ran into us, and not into the Admiral Scheer, which was, in fact, "around the nearest corner."

In March, we made a short excursion to the Mozambique Channel. Here our potential victims behaved very interestingly. To the signal "Stop immediately," they responded with a signal: "Are you all right? Do you need help?"

And we let them move on.

In May 1941, from a BBC broadcast, we learned about the loss of our prizes "Ketty Brovig" and "Coburg", sunk by British cruisers.

Then came a message about the death of our brother - the famous auxiliary cruiser "Penguin". Going into the abyss, he continued to fire at the enemy, without lowering the flag. Only 30 of his crew survived. Sad as the news of the death of our comrades, most of whom we knew personally, everything faded into the background after receiving the message that the Bismarck had sunk the Hood.

This news was immediately broadcast over the ship's broadcast, but it caused little joy. Knowing the English well, many understood that having lost their Hood pride, they would stop at nothing until they avenged this loss.

We literally lost our peace, listening to the air, catching fragments of messages from submarines, from aircraft, merchant ships and coast stations.

It is difficult to convey the horror that seized all of us when, from the message of the English cruiser Dorsetshire, we learned that the Bismarck was lost.

Perhaps for the first time, we realized that the war would not end as quickly as many of us expected, and that we could well lose it just like the last one.

The death of the Bismarck directly affected us. Now the enemy battleships, not being bound by anyone in the North Atlantic, will rush south along with the armadas of cruisers and destroyers accompanying them, destroying the entire support system for the raiders and their themselves.

Rogge decided to temporarily leave the Atlantic and, bypassing Cape Horn, enter the Pacific Ocean in order to wait there until "the furious wasps return to their nest."

Rogge's decision to go to the Pacific Ocean excited everyone. It meant still long and long months of sailing; and after all, apart from a short landing on Kerguelen, we have not seen land for more than a year. And although Rogge's decision was not easy, the heavy impression that it made on the crew did not become less from this.

Sixty percent of the sailors of our crew were family people, called from

reserve. On the shore they left their relatives and a good job, which they dreamed of returning to. Separated from their families, they went about constantly worried about the consequences of the British air raids on our cities and the consequences of the blockade, which had already led Germany to a food rationing system. Are their wives and children alive? Are they starving? But this was the decision of the commander, and no one expected that it would become popular. Rogge even considered it superfluous to explain this to anyone, except for the navigator and me.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," he said, "but my decision is final. I understand that it does not please you at all. Believe me, it does not please me to the same extent, but we have no other choice. Otherwise, we will destroy the Atlantis. Besides, the war is going on and we have to make sure that the British are aware of this in every corner of the world.

In principle, Rogge was right. We had used only a third of our ammunition, the Atlantis was in excellent condition in all respects and had enough fuel for many months.

swimming.

However, Berlin allowed Rogge to take refuge in Dakar at will, but the commander refused: "We may slip through there, but we will never get out of there." And none of us had the slightest desire to stay at anchor in Dakar for the rest of the war. On the other hand, our appearance in the Pacific on the lines leading to and from Australia will be a new surprise for the British, which will allow them to inflict sufficient damage.

- Well, - we agreed with the commander. - And then what?

"So that's it," Rogge smiled. "In the autumn we will try to return to the South Atlantic, and in the winter, when the nights become longer, we will break through to the north.

We turned south, but on this way we still came across two new victims - the Rabaul and the Trafalgar.

On June 17th we sank the transport Tottenham, commanded by Captain Woodak. The transport had ammunition in its holds, and therefore exploded like a volcano.

Five days later, on June 22, we sank the steamer Balzac, which was carrying a cargo of rice and wax, and also a lot of mail.

Having got rid of the prisoners, we continued to move east: we passed Prince Edward Island, passed the new Amsterdam under the torrents of tropical rain and terrible hail. The hailstones fell with a whistle like small air bombs. The sea was raging, clouds were creeping along the very surface of the ocean. Never before have we seen such a wild manifestation of the oceanic element in partnership with such wild skies.

Fatigue and overstrain of the crew began to affect. From time to time, the signalers began to see strange things like the "Flying Dutchmen" of the old days. Some began to have nervous breakdowns - it seemed to them that intrigues were being woven against them, they were being picked on by trifles and everyone hated them.

Psychological breakdown was felt literally in everyone. Staying for more than a year in the closed space of the ship among the same people, the monotony of life according to the ship's routine - all this could not but affect the condition of the crew.

Almost everyone became withdrawn; various trifles, previously unnoticed, caused bouts of irritation and suspiciousness.

"Mor," Rogge once said to me, when we stood together on the bridge, "I decided to send

crew on vacation.

- On vacation? I asked. "Where to?" On some nearest ice floe?

I allowed myself to joke, although I knew that Rogge did not like to throw words. If he says it, then he probably has some kind of ace up his sleeve, or even two.

"We are not in a position to give the crew a vacation on shore," the commander continued, ignoring my jokes, "so we will give them vacation right on the ship. Each has seven days. During this time, they will be released from all state duties and even from intra-ship discipline. They may not go to constructions and not even participate in emergency calls. The only exception is combat alerts. In case of an alarm, they should be in their places according to the combat schedule. I put you in charge of this event, lieutenant. Organize the whole thing and make sure that the accommodation for vacationers is comfortable and pleasant to look at.

The idea was great. She prevented many incidents that might have occurred due to fatigue and nervous overexertion.

We decorated the holiday home with paintings, ship models, photographs of relatives, etc. All this delighted the crew.

A couple of days later I went into the commander's cabin and reported.

— To you deputation, mister captain of the 1st rank.

— Deputation? Rogge asked in surprise.

At the door of the cabin stood the first batch of vacationers dressed in tracksuits. Bags were stacked at their feet, adorned with the labels of the best resort hotels in Germany.

Later, a telegram was sent to the commander: "We are having a great time. The weather is wonderful!" All this, of course, did not fit in with the ship's charter and the strictest wartime discipline, but such was Rogge's method of leading subordinates.

But our affairs did not always go so smoothly and radiantly. Unexpected problems arose right out of the blue. The signalmen, substituting for meals, hurriedly left the galley without clearing their tables. This irritated the other sailors.

"Who are these signalers that they behave like this? Are we supposed to clean up after them? You might think that they alone are serving, and we are all resting here!

The foreman appeared and ordered one of the screamers: "Put away the dishes and wipe the table!" There was dead silence.

- Whom did I tell? the sergeant snarled. "What are you waiting for?" Get off the table!

Silence.

- Clear the table! - ordered the foreman. - Repeat the order!

Two sailors were about to go to the table, but they stopped and one of them said:

"This is the signalers' table. Let them clean up.

"I don't care whose table it is!" - cut off the foreman. - Follow orders!

The sailors looked at each other and answered firmly:

We won't clean up!

- What? the sergeant yelled. "You refuse to obey orders?!"

"Let's not clean up after the signalmen," the sailors repeated stubbornly.

An officer on duty appeared in the galley.

"What happened, sergeant major?" - he asked.

The foreman reported that the sailors were refusing to clear the table.

When the officer appeared, everyone stood at attention.

Did you hear the order from the foreman? barked the officer.

"That's right, Lieutenant!"

- Do it!

"We won't, Lieutenant!"

Are you refusing to follow orders?

"That's right, Lieutenant!"

About thirty sailors, who were in the galley, were waiting to see how this ridiculous bickering would end.

The duty officer called the guard and arrested both sailors. I concurrently served as chairman of the military court. The position was very delicate. Both sailors were accused of disobeying an order in wartime, which was equated with a mutiny, especially since all this happened in front of several dozen sailors.

From this it followed that both should be shot or hanged.

The alternative could have been their acquittal, but that was not possible, since their guilt did not need to be proven. The order must be executed in any case. Therefore, their justification would not only be illegal, but also dangerous, since it would have a corrupting effect on the entire crew. However, the motives of their behavior and complete repentance, when they cooled down and came to their senses, in our specific conditions did not allow us to apply to them the harsh measures provided for by military laws.

I tried to find, as the British say, the "golden mean", desperately leafing through the code of military laws. And found.

"Bring in the arrested," I ordered.

And when the sailors were brought, he announced the sentence to them:

"Three months of confinement in the fortress.

At one time, this type of punishment was invented for officers of noble birth and was considered an honorable conclusion. But in the conditions of the ship, such a sentence sounded so menacing and incomprehensible that the sentenced sailors turned pale, and the rest somehow fell silent.

"Three months in the fortress?" - Kamenets was surprised when the arrested were taken away. - But it's impossible to do it?

"That's the point," I muttered.

As a result, both "rebels" spent two weeks in a punishment cell.

In addition, we had a problem that could well have been foreseen. It was the problem of men cut off from women's society for a long time and forced to live together in a cramped steel box. For this reason, we were very afraid of the presence of captured women on board, but, fortunately, all fears turned out to be in vain.

But when we celebrated the New Year on Kerguelen and arranged the so-called "cabaret", disguising several fragile-looking sailors as women, two cases of homosexuality were noted on the ship. I would say that when sailors are put ashore somewhere in Kiel or Bremen, there are more emergencies of this kind than those that we encountered on board the Atlantis.

"Sailors should always be busy," Rogge emphasized, "then they simply won't have time to think about all sorts of stupid things, let alone do them."

X

At first, Rogge intended to get into the Pacific Ocean by rounding Cape Horn, but something told him that it was there that the British were looking forward to the Atlantis. Therefore, the raider commander turned the ship not to the west, as many expected, but to the east. Following the very edge of Antarctica's pack ice, the Atlantis rounded New Zealand and headed for the Kermadec Islands, seven hundred miles to the north, once again out of Antarctic cold into tropical heat.

This was a naval version of the "flank march" by which Rogge tried to refute the well-known mathematical axiom that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. The mathematical law of the captain of the 1st rank Rogge was correct within the framework of the philosophical concept, according to which it is better to be careful than sunk. Everyone on Atlantis agreed with this.

At the end of August 1941, Atlantis passed the Antipodes Islands, watching their black desert rocks on the horizon.

It was in this area that a strange event occurred, which no one on the raider, either then or later, could explain. The ship entered some mysterious zone of complete non-transmission of radio waves - a zone of radio silence.

The radio operators on the Atlantis scanned every frequency band, but heard nothing. It seemed like the whole world had died out. Not even atmospheric noise could be heard. The ship had traveled about two hundred miles before the outside world made itself known again in a barely audible Morse code from somewhere in Australia.

Atlantis tried to pass as far south as possible to avoid detection by Australian aircraft, as the auxiliary cruiser Orion had once done in the area. On September 10, the raider's signalers discovered the steamer Silvaplana, which was destined to become the last victim of the Atlantis.

From Lieutenant More's diary:

The Silvaplane carried the romantic cargo that one would expect in this land of turquoise seas and whispering waves, scattered green islands and quiet lagoons.

In the fifty chests of the forward hold we found small mahogany idols from the island of Bali. The most superstitious of our sailors even lost their heads.

"They will bring us misfortune," they assured.

"No misfortune can last forever," I consoled them.

In addition to the idols, the steamer carried a cargo of coffee, vanilla, wax and teak. The holds smelled intoxicatingly of expensive woods and exotic spices.

The nearly one hundred tons of coffee that was on the Silvaplan was worth a fortune on the European black market, given the fact that the old continent was in the grip of an English naval blockade. It remained only to sigh for the old days, when corsairs and suppliers of exotic goods to Europe acted in close cooperation.

The Silvaplane also made an excellent impression on Rogge. It was a magnificent vessel, modern and fast. It was captured without bloodshed. It was our best prize since Ole Jacob.

I sat in the wardroom in the best of spirits.

Do you know what we are called? our demolition officer Fehler, who was studying the captured newspapers, asked me. "The rattlesnake of the ocean!"

— A rattlesnake? I was surprised.

"Yes," Fehler confirmed. "The Australian newspapers gave us such an affectionate name.

"Whatever you say," I agreed, "but we bit them pretty good!"

"Since we are snakes," Fehler laughed, "we must bite—it is painful and deadly.

... Rogge called me to his cabin in the morning.

"For a new series of operations," the commander announced, "we need a base. We must choose a suitable island, from where we will release our seaplane for reconnaissance, and we ourselves will follow where it points. In any case, palm trees and sandy beaches will not bring much harm to any of us. Let me know your thoughts on this as soon as possible.

We have chosen the islet of Wana Wana in the group of the lower Cook Islands. The knowledge of the sailors about these places was gleaned exclusively from Hollywood films. They sincerely believed that on the island they would be met by appetizing natives in skirts made of palm leaves and garlands of bright tropical flowers.

The raider's radio could transmit Nazi marches, but the sailors did not hear them - guitars and the sonorous voices of exotic girls sang in their ears.

Although the journey was not safe - it was necessary to slip through a narrow passage of a coral reef - but there were so many people who wanted to go on this expedition that if we took everyone, the Atlantis would have remained empty, like the Mary Celeste.

The ocean swell, crashing against coral reefs, flew high up like a fountain

and fell down, threatening to flood the boat. We could not say anything specific about the nature of this phenomenon, but we had to work with oars from the heart before we made our way into the lagoon, and then climbed out onto the beach tired to the point of exhaustion and soaked to the skin. threads.

The sand, mixed with fragments of coral, sparkled dazzlingly in the sun. Twenty meters away were tall palm trees and several huts could be seen.

— Hollywood! Fehler declared admiringly. "Corals, lagoon, palms, coconuts!" But there are no girls! Where are they?

There were no girls in the two reed huts closest to our landing site. From the huts came whimpers and grunts. We looked into one and found a brood of ten puppies in the corner. Nearby was a pot of some food that was still warm.

"So," I said. "They are scared and hid. They need to be calmed down."

We left knives and a universal, internationally recognized currency - cigarettes - as a gift to the natives. When we returned the next day, a deputation of about twenty natives, headed by a leader, was waiting for us right on the beach.

They were quite friendly. Next to the chief stood a woman of indeterminate age, wearing an apron over a flowered dress. Fehler quipped something about this, but I, not listening to him, bowed to the leader, depicting my most gallant smile on my face. Then the doctor accompanying us took out a Red Cross flag from his backpack and handed it to the leader. The leader radiated gratitude and pleasure with all his appearance.

Despite some linguistic difficulties - the natives knew only about a dozen English words - we quickly found a common language with them with the help of gestures. When we showed them that we needed coconuts, they quickly brought us about five hundred pieces! In exchange, we gave them several sacks of flour. Along the way, it turned out that the only ship that appeared in the lagoon of the island twice a year was a schooner that bartered consumer goods for copra.

The white population had long since left Vanu-Vana, and although there was a small, lovingly built church on the island, there had been no service in it for almost half a century. So it couldn't have been a better place.

Our seaplane landed in the lagoon, anchored, and in the morning flew off for reconnaissance. And the Atlantis was anchored on the other side of the coral reef that surrounds the island.

The whole point of this operation was to avoid the very tedious procedure of getting it on board the Atlantis every time the plane took off and especially when it landed on the water.

It has never been a pleasant experience. First, it was necessary to land a rather heavy Arado on a two-three-meter wave of ocean swell, and then taxi up to a rocking ship, which tried to stand in such a way as to create a more or less even surface of water at the side. After that, the pilot got out of the cockpit onto the fuselage, where, kneeling in the pose of a copulating mule, he tried to catch a heavy steel hook swinging at the end of a steel cable and madly spinning around its axis, solving two problems at once: not to get hit on the head with this hook and not to fly off from the fuselage into the water.

To do this, it was necessary to have the qualities of a circus acrobat and a juggler at the same time. Having caught the hook, the pilot hooked it to a special eye on the fuselage of the aircraft, and together they

hauled aboard the ship.

The pilot of the reconnaissance aircraft on the Atlantis was Lieutenant Bulla. It was only thanks to him that in January we managed to capture the English cargo ship Mandasor. We could not catch up with this ship, and Rogge ordered the pilot to do this - to catch up with the ship and hold it until the raider approached. It was, I must say, a deadly number. The ship had one 100-mm and one 75-mm gun and two machine guns, which opened friendly fire on Lieutenant Bulla, trying to drive him away.

On the first run, Bulla destroyed the Mandasora's antenna, and on the second run, he fired on the bridge with a machine gun and dropped a couple of bombs on the ship. But the British said goodbye to him so "warmly" that the downed Bulla was forced to land on the water, waiting for the Atlantis to pick him up.

Now Bulla flew every day, but could not find anything.

Our last night on Wana Wana Island was a sentimental one. We sat by the fire and sang songs. In their hearts, no one wanted to leave this hospitable oasis and again go into the cruel and hostile sea. When the Atlantis set sail, the natives, gathered on the shore, waved their hands at us. They especially fell in love with our doctor, who managed to cure many of them from a rare eye disease that was rampant there.

The Atlantis zigzagged slowly eastward, hoping for more prey. But no one came across, and we were even glad of this. The Pacific Ocean gave rise to a strange feeling of being cut off from all earthly affairs and worries, of which there were so many at the beginning of our raid.

We came to Henderson Island, famous for its Bounty legend. The island was uninhabited, but right on the beach there was a large wooden sign on which was written: "Henderson Island. The island belongs to King George V. Apparently, some British cruiser came here ten years before us.

We continued moving east. It was boring, but at the same time everyone had fun as best they could.

Lieutenant Fehler stole a favorite canary from one of the officers, and put the ship's cat in a cage instead. We had a rendezvous with the Komet, a raider that the Russians took the Northern Sea Route from the Barents Sea to the Bering Strait.

"Komet" hunted on the sea routes between Japan and the west coast of the United States. For some inexplicable reason, a long-standing rivalry has developed between our ships.

We recently learned that the commander of the Comet, Captain 1st Rank Eissen, was promoted to rear admiral right during the raid, and decided to take the opportunity to have fun with our rival, saluting him as a flagship. At the sight of the Comet, which was much smaller than the Atlantis, we raised our flags and solemnly saluted the flagship from an anti-aircraft gun.

Rogge, in white dress uniform with epaulettes, paid a visit to the Komet, acting as if he were a cruiser commander called by the admiral to the battleship. But no one understood our humor. Eissen took everything for granted, and, in accepting us, was as important as the late Tirpitz, apparently sincerely considering himself "commander-in-chief" over all the raiders in the ocean.

Of much greater interest was the return of our navigator Kamenets, who arrived on the Atlantis in a submarine after completing a round-the-world trip through Japan, Russia and Germany. When we learned that Kamenets after his appearance on board

Atlantis will immediately be vaccinated against typhoid and cholera, we decided to give this operation as much drama as possible.

Everyone on the ship knew that Kamenets was obsessed with the idea of a "Masonic conspiracy," so when he appeared in the wardroom, he was met by three figures in pulled-down hoods and silk aprons, who sat at the head of a table lit by candles. The rest of the officers stood in the shadows, dressed in what looked like Ku Klux Klan uniforms.

Two doctors and a paramedic sat at the table.

"Brother Kamenz," Dr. Reil asked in an ominous voice, "what are you willing to sacrifice to join our secret brotherhood?"

Before the bewildered Kamenets could utter a word, they laid him on the table and, to the singing of ritual psalms, made all the necessary vaccinations.

On the ship, they began to call him "our Odysseus, who suffered from the Masons."

Meanwhile, the Atlantis, having rounded Cape Horn, entered the South Atlantic. Although it was full of English people, everyone was glad to be back in the familiar waters through which our way home lay.

We were climbing north, bypassing the Falklands, when a radio message came from Germany: "Proceed to Floor Point Daffodile to refuel U-68."

Rogge glanced at the map, noting the location indicated in the radiogram.

"Madness," he said in surprise. "Total madness."

A few minutes later, Atlantis transmitted a response radiogram: "Sending us to the indicated place corresponds to an order to commit suicide."

The submarine commander also supported our opinion. The command has chosen a place for our rendezvous on the busiest shipping routes between Freetown and the Cape of Good Hope.

We were allowed to proceed to another place, which was perhaps less dangerous, but still quite frequented in order to feel comfortable during the refueling operation.

"Thank God that everything ended well," I thought, when the I-68, moving away from our side, disappeared into the sea. But before we were on course, we received another radio message: "Proceed to Floor Point Lily Ten to refuel the submarine U-126."

"Where is Lily Ten?" Rogge asked.

Kamenz made several calculations.

"Right here," the navigator pointed with a pencil at the very top of the map and repeated, "right here."

We looked at a small dot marked with a pencil by Kamenets on the map. We were not tormented by any premonitions, and, of course, no one could even think that Kamenets had already marked the place of the Atlantis grave on the map.

"An enemy heavy cruiser is on the horizon!"

"We see the enemy's heavy cruiser!" The voices of the Atlantis signalers rang out from unrest.

These voices had not yet died down, when bells and battle alarms sounded on the Atlantis: "Enemy heavy cruiser!", "Enemy heavy cruiser!" spread throughout the ship.

No one yet took these words as an announcement of the end of the Atlantis' combat career - everyone was in their places according to the combat schedule, ready to fight even with a heavy cruiser, even with a battleship. However, in their hearts, everyone knew that the last day of their incredible raid would come someday, luck could not be infinite, and this day must come...

The morning of November 22, 1941 was overcast, but visibility was good. The Atlantis and the submarine U-126 were stationed side-by-side at the appointed rendezvous point. The boat took fuel, both ships did not move.

It was a typical calm South Atlantic morning. It was calm, like on a city street at the hour of dawn, when traffic had not yet begun. Many, including Lieutenant More, had just woken up and yawned as they went out on deck.

The submarine stood at the side of the raider, connected to it with a fuel hose.

From the side, it seemed that the small boat trustingly clung to the high side of the Atlantis, sucking in the vital forces, not fearing anything, like a child in the presence of a mother.

Rogge was in his cabin talking to the captain of the boat over a bottle of Sherry. On the watch, they recalled a sad event: yesterday, when landing on the water, the Atlantis plane was killed, overwhelmed by a wave. It was hard to be left without eyes in such a dangerous area. In the wardroom they drank morning coffee, chatting on abstract topics. The sea was calm with a light breeze. At that moment, the desperate cry of the signalman was heard, who discovered the heavy cruiser of the enemy.

In a second, the fuel hose going to the submarine was disconnected.

A second later, the commander of the boat, jumping out of Rogge's cabin, appeared on the upper deck. But it was too late! His assistant reacted instantly: instead of his boat, her commander saw foaming air bubbles overboard of the Atlantis, showing the dive site of the U-126. Cursing with terrible words, the boat commander darted around the deck of the Atlantis.

On the bridge, the raiders were perplexed: why did the boat sink so urgently, if they didn't even see the enemy there? Then they realized: the signalmen of the submarine were the first to notice an English seaplane flying in the direction of the Atlantis.

It was a Walrus carrier-based aircraft ejected from an English cruiser. He laid a wide circle over the Atlantis, apparently conducting aerial photography. Anti-aircraft gunners kept the plane in sight, but did not open fire. Rogge banned. On the bridge, various options for a possible rescue were hastily discussed. Rogge was outwardly calm, but his eyes betrayed alarm.

"Let's try to bluff," he suggested, "by impersonating the British. Options:

the English cruiser will believe and leave; will not believe it and will come closer to check it - then it will be possible to get it with torpedoes. We also have a submarine. She's in the vicinity now, and might try to drive the cruiser away. I'm taking as long as possible. Make sure all guns are camouflaged!

Through the binoculars, the English three-pipe heavy cruiser (later it turned out that it was the Devonshire) was already clearly visible, going, judging by the raised surf, at full speed towards rapprochement with the Atlantis. The trunks of its towers were clearly visible, aimed at the raider. The British clearly did not want to waste time in vain. The gray silhouette of the British cruiser was lit up by gunfire, and an eight-inch shell, flying over the masts of the Atlantis, exploded with a terrible roar into the sea behind the raider. Another flash, and another similar projectile rushed into the sea, not reaching the Atlantis.

The hint was taken correctly.

- Stop the ship! Rogge ordered.

The noise of the diesels died away, and an ominous silence hung over the Atlantis. People stood at combat posts, afraid to breathe. Most people still believed in luck, which was on their side for a year and a half. She can't leave them so suddenly!

With the help of a captured British signal lantern, the cruiser was given its name - "Polyphemus", and on the radio, as required by the instructions of the British Admiralty, they transmitted a signal of a merchant ship taken by surprise in need of help and support: "RRR. "Polyphemus". RRR. An unknown ship ordered me to stop. RRR. "Polyphemus".

There was nothing else to do. It remained only to wait how the British would react to this. A searchlight came on on the Devonshire, ordering the Atlantis to stay where she was. Someone on the raider remembered the old naval prayer of Nelson's time: "Lord, send me something for which I would be very grateful to you!" The English cruiser was clearly not satisfied with the explanations of the Atlantis, starting to check them, but not in the way that the German raider expected. The British did not approach the Atlantis, but asked their Admiralty for the whereabouts of the real Polyphemus.

Rogge knew that the real Polyphemus had recently left Spain and must have been somewhere in the area. Apparently, from the English cruiser they saw some signs of wolf fangs under the sheep's skin of the Atlantis, because they behaved very carefully: they continued to follow the zigzag course and did not approach the Atlantis less than 16,000 meters, that is, they kept out of the range of guns and torpedo tubes of the raider. Above the Atlantis, the Devonshire floatplane continued to buzz like a pesky wasp. Because of this, movement on the deck was limited. At all combat posts they dreamed that the engine of the plane would fail and it would crash! The entire command of Atlantis gathered on the bridge: commander, senior gunner, miner and navigator. Lieutenant More, who was also there, caught himself thinking that all these most experienced naval officers were unable to do anything in this situation, but only hoped for a miracle, like lambs before the slaughter.

The searchlight on the Devonshire again flashed some message that the Atlantis did not understand. Perhaps the English cruiser requested a secret call sign, which the Germans, of course, did not know. On the bridge of the raider, like an angry tiger in a cage, the commander of U-126 rushed back and forth, becoming more and more angry due to the fact that the boat, having sunk, no longer manifested itself.

He did not at all want to be drowned on the "lousy merchant", which, in his opinion,

was Atlantis. Rogge, unable to stand it, ordered him to get off the bridge and said, turning to his officers:

"Of course, the Englishman will quickly find out that we are not Polyphemus at all. Then, I think, everything will start. But I won't open fire yet.

Everyone present knew that the raider's guns could not reach the enemy at the distance that he kept with such skill. Even if the guns could be reached, their 150mm shells would not do much damage to an armored ship carrying 203mm guns.

"At least a couple of shells," senior artilleryman Kash begged the commander. "For the sake of prestige?!"

"No," Rogge snapped. "We'll bluff to the end." If he fires on us and we don't answer, the British will think we are some kind of supply ship, and finally come closer. Then we will have a chance, multiplied by the element of surprise.

Half an hour passed. During this time, Rogge ordered the distribution of dollars to the officers, which he kept in a safe "in case of emergency." Suddenly they are so lucky that the money will still come in handy?

At 09:35 "Devonshire", apparently, everything was already clear. All the towers of the British cruiser blazed with red-yellow fire. The first salvo sent ferocious geysers of pale green water around the Atlantis, shrouded in black smoke from explosions.

Fragments with a ringing hit the sides and superstructures of the raider.

- Full speed ahead! Rogge commanded. "Raise the topmast flag!"

With the second salvo, the British scored at least two direct hits. The Atlantis came to a halt, trembling in its entire hull, and then moved forward again.

- Set up a chimney! Rogge ordered.

White acid smoke for some time closed the Atlantis from the Devonshire, which continued to conduct murderous fire. Under a hail of shells, the Atlantis, writhing on course like a slithering snake, tried to escape to the southeast, hoping to point the Devonshire at the submarine. But all was in vain. The commander of the Devonshire proved to be experienced enough to continue to shoot the Atlantis, remaining practically in place. Rogge also reduced his speed to one and a half knots so as not to leave the smoke screen, but to maintain steering control. The crew was ordered to leave the ship. The sailors acted calmly, as in exercises.

More hurried to his quarters to destroy some ciphers and secret documents and get a camera, as he was anxious to film the sinking of the Atlantis. Stuffing some of his personal belongings into his pockets, the lieutenant returned to the bridge.

Only now did he notice what serious damage the Atlantis had already received. The deck was cluttered with the wreckage of broken ventilation funnels, cranes, davits and life rafts.

Almost all of the camouflage shields were broken, exposing the gun mounts. Small fires were still burning almost everywhere on the upper deck, but a column of black smoke was already enveloping the superstructures and masts of the Atlantis in funerary crepe.

On the way up to the bridge, Pestilence slipped on a pool of blood, the Devonshire's fourth salvo.

killed eight people. Only Rogge remained on the bridge, Chief Petty Officer Pigors, Lieutenant More, the commander's old co-sailor still on training sailboats, as well as Lieutenant Fehler's demolition men, who were supposed to hasten the death of Atlantis. Another shell hit the Atlantis, then another. The ship lists heavily to port. The end was drawing near. "Atlantis" was dying, not responding to enemy fire. Long-barreled 150-mm guns stared blindly into the overcast sky because of broken camouflage shields. The bluff that Rogge had hoped for had failed completely, and the Devonshire, as distant as the sky itself, sent volley after volley into the dying Atlantis.

Lieutenant Fehler and his demolition men, having done their job, jumped overboard. Pigors followed them, taking word from Rogge that he was not going to die with the ship. Only Rogge and Mor remained on the bridge.

The fire, meanwhile, flared up, the flames roared, devouring the Atlantis.

"Jump, Mor, jump," Rogge ordered, trying to shout over the noise of the flames. "I will follow you!"

Mort mustered up his courage and threw himself overboard. From Lieutenant More's diary:

No sooner had I been in the water than an English shell thumped into the water nearby, stunning me with a shock wave and covering me with a wave of the sea.

I was seized with panic. It seemed that the British were shooting at me and only at me. To take cover from the next projectile, I dived under the water, not realizing the complete idiocy of my behavior.

In a fit of panic, I was worried about the question of whether they see me from the Devonshire or not, although the English cruiser was at a distance of 16 kilometers. I prayed they wouldn't notice me!

I was brought to my senses by the explosions on the Atlantis. And only after that I heard the voices of people floundering in the water near the dying ship. The explosions I heard were not English shells. It was the charges planted by Lieutenant Fehler that exploded. The end was already near. "Atlantis", plunging stern, went under water. His nose turned up, and for the first time I saw the scar inflicted by the underwater reef at Kerguelen.

The Atlantis, which had been our home for almost two years, was now sinking after its victims, leaving its crew at the mercy of the wind and waves. With a last groan like the noise of etching steam, the Atlantis disappeared from the surface. I saw Rogge salute his ship. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

We had already lowered our lifeboats and launches, ordering them to get far enough away so that the British would not see them. Now, waiting for their return, we swam, clinging to the numerous debris that surfaced at the site of the sinking of the Atlantis. A few meters away, I noticed a man constantly going under the water and reappearing on the surface waving his arms frantically.

Somehow, in my state of mind, I decided that this sailor did not know about the British ceasefire and was acting as stupid as I had a few minutes ago. I called him and shouted that the Devonshire had ceased fire and there was nothing more to fear. He didn't answer. I swam up to him, grabbed his shoulders, trying to lift him above the water. I felt it getting heavier, but I couldn't figure out what it was until I heard someone close by screaming "SHARKS!"

A terrible force tore the unfortunate body out of my hands, and I managed to notice the black and white belly of a huge fish, which dragged one of our sailors into the abyss. Praying, cursing and crying, I tried to swim away, again not quite understanding what I was doing. Another sailor next to me screamed terribly and disappeared under the water. His cry seemed to drain the last of my strength, and I was seized by some kind of strange numbness. I do not remember whether I laughed or cried, until I was brought out of this state by the cry of another sailor passing by: "Save yourself! Sharks!"

This cry restored my strength, I grabbed hold of some kind of board, giving myself to the mercy of Providence. An English seaplane reappeared above us. The hum of its engine, which had accompanied us since the beginning of the battle, was now replaced by the roar of the engine, as the plane flew only a few meters above our heads.

For some reason I thought: "How strange. Only a few meters separate us from the complete safety of the cockpit, where no shark can reach. Only a few meters, but they are as unattainable for us as the stars in the sky!" I saw quite clearly the face of the English pilot who was filming us with a movie camera as proof of his victory. The enemy plane was persistently circling above us. In his presence, the hope was fading that the submarine U-126 would remember us and surface to pick us up. Until the Devonshire and her plane left us in peace, this, of course, was out of the question.

The Devonshire was still a small dash on the horizon. It seemed to me like an eternity before his plane stopped circling above us and flew back to his cruiser. We were alone again. Except for the sharks. The horror of the presence of sharks is incomparable to anything. When before your eyes people disappear under water, and their blood rises to the surface, and you understand that you can become the next yourself and are powerless to do anything, physically feeling the terrible teeth tearing your flesh, then there can hardly be a person who does not fall panic under such circumstances. I don't know why, but after a while the sharks left us alone. Perhaps fed up.

Two hours later I was dragged into one of our longboats. It is an incomparable luxury to feel some kind of support under your feet again. I came to my senses and looked around. It was difficult to recognize people smeared with diesel fuel. Everyone pulled out on the longboat, having come to his senses, began to ask about his friends.

I tried to find Cross, who was the helmsman of the prize crew, but found out that he had died, torn apart by a shell while still aboard the Atlantis.

An experienced veteran Pigors, who once sailed with Rogge on training sailboats, survived. He was to die later, aboard a submarine. Dr. Reil busied about the wounded, trying mainly to get people out of their state of shock.

In the launch I saw our first mate Kuen, pilot Bulla, and the unfortunate commander of U-126, Lieutenant Commander Bauer, "scanning" the ocean with an almost insane look in search of the submarine entrusted to him. When, finally, "U-126" surfaced, and Bauer, regaining his former confidence and aplomb, met his young first mate at the wheelhouse, a conversation took place between them, which I am unable to convey due to the originality of the language used by both officer.

Our boats and longboats, carrying more than three hundred men, crowded around the submarine, where an impromptu meeting began on what to do next. The strangest meeting I've ever been in.

Two alternatives were discussed.

First. We could head for Freetown. If it were only about our salvation, then the eastern currents could quickly carry us to busy sea lanes.

Second. We could have gone to Brazil. It looked quite fantastic, since Brazil was almost 900 miles away.

The first option was immediately rejected by Rogge. The commander did not want him and his crew to end the war in a POW camp. I must say that none of us wanted to become prisoners of war. Chief Petty Officer Frolikh insisted on the Brazilian version. He once served on the Landsdorf, a supply ship for the Admiral Graf Spee. After the death of the Spee, Frolich was interned by the local authorities, but escaped, hid among the German colonists for some time, and then went home on a blockade breaker. The blockade breaker met the Atlantis at sea, and Rogge personally convinced Frolich to switch to the raider: "I need people like you." By specialty, Frolikh was an excellent radio operator, and here he also became an expert on the issue of "how to escape to Latin America and how to escape from Latin America."

In the end, we decided to get to Brazil.

My dollars dried up and I was ready to spend them in Rio. To begin with, the U-126 submarine was supposed to take on board our wounded, which for some reason did not please its commander, who began to protest: "I don't have a hospital ship! Maybe you still have to be towed to Brazil? True, he agreed to temporarily place them on the upper deck of the boat, warning: "If the British appear, immediately jump into the water and quickly sail away so that you are not drawn into the whirlpool from my immersion." After such an encouraging address, we hitched one by one to the submarine, stretched out like pilgrims on their way to Mecca through a vast and extremely dangerous desert.

The ocean may well be called the most dangerous and most treacherous desert. The prospect of a 900-mile hike looked much more pleasant! Especially when you consider that the "pilgrims" held on, like a donkey's tail, to the stern of the submarine. Two hours later, I realized that we somewhat overestimated our capabilities by starting this campaign, which, under the most favorable circumstances, should have lasted at least 12 days. Firstly, the ends connecting us with the submarine and with each other were constantly torn. In addition, our boats themselves, designed for forty people, now had seventy or more on board. Overloaded boats barely crawled, overwhelmed by the ocean swell.

The scorching tropical sun caused us a lot of trouble. There were scratches and abrasions, corroded by salt water and cauterized by the sun. The lips were cracked, the eyes hurt unbearably, they swelled and watered. The bottom of the boats was so hot that it was unbearable to touch it with bare feet. Many tore their shirts and made themselves something like socks. As night fell, the temperature dropped to almost zero. We froze, teeth chattering from the cold, clinging to each other to warm up a little. At such moments, we even envied our wounded, whom Bauer allowed to go down inside the "U-126", where they were warm. Our suffering continued for three days. However, to be honest, we did not sip even a tenth of what fell to the lot of other sailors who, after the death of their ships, had to escape on boats and rafts in these waters. Our wounded were on the submarine, and we escaped the worst: to see how your comrades die before your eyes from heat, cold and thirst, to hear their dying

groans and suffer from impotence to help them in any way. We lost only ten men against the Devonshire, and although Brazil was as far away as the moon, we trusted that Fortune, who had previously been so kind to the Atlantis, would not turn away from us immediately after her death.

And we weren't wrong! After 36 hours of our ordeal on the waves, we saw on the horizon

smoke, and then the ship pointed at us by a special signal from a submarine. Of course, we knew about this signal, but the ocean is so vast that it is possible to find boats in it only with great luck and good weather.

The ship turned out to be our steamship "Python" (3660 tons), which was ordered to refuel German submarines in the ocean. We paddled to the board. The sailors of the "Python", leaning over the rail, looked at us as if at some kind of miracle, poured jokes and ridicule. Indeed, we looked like savages: naked, half-naked, smeared with diesel fuel and fuel oil, with bruised and dried blood on our faces. Only Rogge continued to keep our brand. He went up to the deck of the steamer dressed in a tunic, shorts and canvas boots. He managed to save even his commander's cap.

Putting his hand to the visor, Rogge reported to the captain of the ship:

"I am reporting the arrival of the commander and crew of the auxiliary cruiser Atlantis aboard the Python.

- I am glad to welcome you on board, Mr. Captain of the 1st rank, - the captain of the "Python" replied.

"Python" received us with cordial hospitality. In my life I have never seen anything more luxurious than the berth that I got in the triple cabin of the steamer and on which I blissed out in within a few hours.

True, we had to work hard before that, with the help of the sailors of the "Python", to lift our priceless Norwegian longboats aboard the steamer.

The sailors of the "Python" were dissatisfied and grumbled: "Why the hell should we be disfigured and drag your pelvis on board? Why do we need them?

"Don't be angry, son," exhorted the foreman from the Atlantis. "These 'pelvises' can still be useful to us and you."

Over the next few days, I was able to recall from memory many of the events associated with the death of the Atlantis. What opportunities have we missed? The main missed opportunity, in my opinion, was the lack of coordination with the submarine we were fueling. Perhaps if her commander had not stayed on board, the situation would have been different. While shooting at us, the Devonshire kept walking in a great circle, and thereby exposing itself to a torpedo salvo. If he had come closer, we would have done it ourselves. Unfortunately, the young assistant, who remained in command of U-126, behaved passively and did not take advantage of the favorable opportunity to attack the English cruiser. Later, I learned that the Devonshire had not blown us to pieces because her commander assumed we had a large number of British prisoners on board. In fact, at that moment we had only one prisoner on board - the wounded American Frank Vikovary from the sunken liner "Zamzam". He was in the infirmary and was one of the first to be lowered into the boat. Having gone through all the vicissitudes of our exotic journey, the American finally returned to his homeland.

On the fifth day, the Python received another order to refuel the submarine. "Let's hope," said Fehler, "that nothing will happen at this gas station. They say a shell doesn't hit the same place twice." But he got in nonetheless. That morning I was lying on my bunk with a book, enjoying idleness. It is good not to be responsible for anything, not to have any responsibilities and to rely completely on those who have to make decisions. I was tired of reading, and I lay on the bed in a kind of half-sleep. I saw bees buzzing over flowers, triangular sails of yachts on the mirror surface of the bay, girls in white dresses sitting at the white tables of an open cafe ...

Suddenly, the calls of a combat alarm burst into my pleasant dreams, I heard the clatter of feet, the clanging of doors and hatches being battened down, someone's cries and commands: "An enemy cruiser is on the horizon!", "I see an enemy cruiser!"

At first I thought I was haunted by nightmares from the recent past, when nine days ago I heard exactly the same cry from the signalers on the Atlantis. Throwing off sleep, I ran out on deck. Already with the naked eye, a three-tube English cruiser (later it turned out that it was the Dorsetshire) was visible, which, raising a large breaker up its nose, was heading straight for us with triumphant militancy.

In all his appearance, a hunter was felt, finally driving the fox to the edge of the abyss. There was a command: "Give the fuel hose!" We began to turn, exposing the enemy to the stern. The submarine, separated from the "Python", dived under the water with the speed of a dolphin. "Full speed ahead! Complete as much as possible! "Python" vibrated and trembled from the unprecedented mode of operation of the machines, giving 14 knots - the same number as he showed on sea trials in his distant youth.

I went up to the bridge where the captain of the Python and Rogge were. In such cases, you always hope for something, although you understand with your head that there is nothing to hope for. And yet? What if our enemy commits some incredible stupidity?.. Or will his cellars explode?.. Or boilers?.. Or some other miracle will happen?..

We barely squeezed 14 knots, our opponent easily gave 28. In such an "equation", the field for optimism was very limited. You could say it didn't exist at all. There was only a relationship between space and time, that is, the time it takes for the enemy to get close and send us to the bottom.

In general, when meeting with an enemy warship, the crew of the supply ship, if there is no way to leave, should, according to the instructions, go into boats, and flood the ship itself so that it does not fall into the hands of the enemy. In our particular case, there was still a faint hope of directing the enemy cruiser to a submarine, which might have a chance to attack.

The chase went on for about half an hour. Then the first 8-inch shell from the Dorsetshire, howling like an air raid siren, exploded in the water almost at our very side, making it clear that my time of serene rest was over. The second shell fell from the opposite side of the "Python", raising a huge fountain of water.

Then I noticed that there was no one at the helm of the steamer. The sailor-helmsman, who stood at the helm just a minute ago, was blown away by the wind. I jumped to the helm and abruptly put it on board. It seems that I overdid it, because the steamer, still maintaining a high speed, was dangerously listing. However, no one noticed my mistake, since the "Python" was already in complete chaos - not from cowardice, but from the senselessness of any actions for their salvation.

The military crew is bound by discipline until the last minute, which cannot be said about civilian sailors. On the Python, among the countless supplies intended for submarines, there were many leather raglans. Remembering how I was freezing at night in the boat, I took one of them. Others wanted to do the same, but the elderly battalion refused them, saying that he would issue raglans only upon a formalized request signed by the captain of the ship. So it didn't come out. The raglans, of course, sank along with the Python.

The minutes passed languidly, the boats slowly filled up. When they were already three-quarters full, some idiot from the Python crew opened the smoke screen valves. This caused a flurry of curses - a smoke screen could provoke the British to resume fire. And in these conditions, a projectile that exploded at the side could break the boats

and kill us all.

I tensed up, expecting to hear the howl of shells. Fortunately, this did not happen. Dorsetshire, describing anti-submarine "eights" at high speed, favorably decided that we had had enough.

We, for our part, were very grateful to the English, as only people who have escaped certain death can be grateful. Apparently, Dorsetshire did not crave a bloody meat grinder. He only wanted to sink the Python.

I watched the sinking of the Python from a much more comfortable environment than the one in which I happened to watch the sinking of the Atlantis. I even photographed his death from our Norwegian longboat, remembering the wisdom of that foreman who said: "These 'pelvises' can still be useful to us and you!"

Shortly after the Dorsetshire disappeared over the horizon, our old friend the submarine surfaced. Everything happened the same way as on November 22. We gathered at her side. The boat commander said that he tried to attack the cruiser, but he did not succeed. "He fooled me," the submariner admitted. "I couldn't have predicted his next move."

Then another submarine surfaced and approached us. Her commander was even less fortunate. His torpedo tubes were depleted. If not for this circumstance, he assured, he would definitely have put a torpedo into an enemy cruiser. Both commanders looked very dull, and it must be admitted that our morale was far from
on high.

Two operations to refuel submarines within one week ended in the same way - with the death of tankers: "Atlantis" and "Python".

We tried right at this impromptu meeting to analyze the reasons for our failures, imagining that we were at some kind of staff conference in Kiel. The cry of the signalman, standing on the wheelhouse of the submarine, brought us back to reality:

"Enemy aircraft! Enemy aircraft!"

After leaving the Dorsetshire, we became very careless, and on the English cruiser, apparently, they decided to take another look at what we actually do after leaving the Python. The submarines undertook an urgent dive, and our longboats danced and whirled in the whirlpools formed at the site of their dive. A few seconds later the English plane was already flying directly over our boats. I ducked instinctively, expecting depth charges to rain down on the dive site and kill us all. The seaplane, flying a few meters above the water, deafened us with the noise of its engine, but did not drop its bombs, but, making a wide circle, headed back to its cruiser. In gratitude, we waved our hands after him.

It took a long time before our underwater friends reappeared on the surface. Prior to that, they carefully scanned the sky through their periscopes to make sure that they were not in for unpleasant surprises when they surfaced.

Unpleasant surprises awaited the command in Berlin, when the boat commanders reported the situation. There were no longer two boats, but four. Two more surfaced near us. Their fuel was low and, like the previous two, they went to rendezvous with the Python to refuel, and were shocked by the news that the Python was sunk. The boats were running out of fuel, torpedoes and provisions.

Thus, the operation against enemy shipping in the South Atlantic had to end before it could begin. How did the enemy manage to reach the Atlantis and the Python so quickly and accurately in the vastness of the ocean? Whether this was due to a leak of information from the headquarters of the naval group "West" or the British had some kind of their own, unknown to us intelligence sources - we did not know. But the operation was thwarted, and this largely sealed our fate.

The submarines were ordered to return to base, taking on board all those rescued from the Atlantis and the Python, that is, about a hundred people for each small submarine. There was a unique scuba diving experience. We moved onto submarines, which destroyed our longboats and lifeboats with machine-gun fire. So the ships were burned!

XII

As soon as Lieutenant More went down inside the submarine, he immediately realized that the journey that awaited him would be very exciting. He squeezed his way with difficulty into some kind of terrible kennel, which, as he was told, was the wardroom of a submarine, designed for four officers of not very large stature. Here all four officers of the boat slept in turns. Now they were joined by nine hefty officers from the dead Atlantis. At first, Mor preferred to sleep on a bunk, which he managed to do - albeit intermittently - for about 90 minutes a day. In the intervals between "dreams" Mor felt half dead, he had only one desire - to wait for his turn to sleep again. This did not last long. After three days of such a life, More realized that a bunk under such circumstances is not the best place to sleep. He decided to sleep right on deck under the saloon dining table, with a life jacket under his head instead of a pillow.

The crew of the submarine was forty people. The appearance of an extra hundred sailors from the Atlantis threw all life on the boat into a state of complete disarray. In addition to the mass of inconvenience that the unexpected passengers brought to the submariners, they also posed a very great danger. The submarine turned out to be heavily overloaded, which led to a loss of maneuverability and controllability. In the event of an attack on her, this state of affairs could end very badly. All compartments were overcrowded with people, which prevented the crew of the boat from performing their duties. There was not enough water and food for such a horde. The commander hoped to replenish provisions and bunker with water from the "Python", which, for obvious reasons, did not happen. When he arrived at the rendezvous point, all his supplies were coming to an end, and instead of them he received a hundred passengers on board. Officers from surface ships, once on a submarine, are always tormented by bouts of claustrophobia, and therefore, when the boat was on the surface, they preferred to be on the upper deck, lying on the floor gratings.

Of the news received during this period, the most important was the news of the outbreak of war between Germany and the United States, with which the American Frank Vicovari was congratulated, transferring him from the status of a passenger to the status of a prisoner. From Lieutenant More's diary:

For three weeks we reached the Cape Verde Islands, where we had an appointment with four Italian submarines, which were supposed to provide the German boats with supplies and take on board some of the rescued. The most difficult and dangerous stage of our long return home lay ahead - through the Bay of Biscay, which

constantly combed by enemy ships and aircraft. Almost all the way to the mouth of the Gironde, the boats had to go underwater.

Shaking hands with Rogge, I jumped into the rubber boat that was supposed to take me aboard the Italian submarine Tazzoli.

None of us were particularly enthusiastic about this, but Rogge decided that we should go through the most dangerous section of the path separately - "in the interests of history," as he put it. Rogge and I each had a copy of the written account of the Atlantis raid and kept much of what was not written in our heads. If one of us was destined to die, then the second remained with the same amount of information. After wishing each other good luck, we parted ways. The ocean wave rocked the submarine, then raising its stern, then lowering it into the waves.

The inflatable boat danced on the swell like a ball. I chose the moment and jumped onto the propeller guard of the submarine and hesitated for a moment before climbing out onto the upper deck of the Tazzoli. That moment of delay nearly cost me my life. The stern of the boat lowered again, and I was covered with water. I managed to hear someone's warning cry and saw a disgustingly terrible black mass that was rushing towards me like a torpedo. The horror that seized me allowed me to make an incredible jump, and I ended up on the deck of a submarine.

Life on an Italian submarine seemed unthinkable luxurious to me. The boat was commanded by the offspring of an old aristocratic family, Fesia di Cossato. He had on board the most valuable collection of first editions of rare books from the field of French erotic literature. A rich table with exciting Italian delicacies. Spacious and furnished, like in a first-class hotel, living quarters. However, all this luxury concerned only officers. The living conditions of the sailors are even difficult to put into words, they were so bestial.

Apparently, Italian submarines were the only ones in the world where there were two galleys - an officer's and a sailor's, two cooks and, of course, two menus - far from each other, like the sun from the earth. But I kept quiet; you can't criticize people who risk their heads trying to get you home.

I lay on my bunk and enjoyed the treasures from the commander's library. I even found a book where all 15,000 exquisite Chinese tortures were described in detail.

Two days before Christmas, the boat's combat siren suddenly howled. I tried to understand the commands given and realized that a merchant ship had been discovered, on which the Tazzoli was trying to attack.

An Italian doctor came up to me with a bottle of champagne in his hand. Radiating solemn optimism, he said: "Let's drink to our victory!"

I was called to the periscope so that I could personally verify the victory. But Signor di Cossato, who was looking through the periscope, suddenly cursed at length in Italian and told me: "Failure! The ship is neutral. Hispanic!"

He easily got out of the embarrassing situation and invited me to drink champagne for the occasion. On Christmas night, the Tazzoli decided to surface under the cover of darkness and was immediately discovered by an English aircraft. I had to dive right in. Depth charge explosions shook the submarine for a long time. During this hour, a strong distaste for submarines and submarine warfare was born in me, where people die in the darkness of a steel coffin that is already ready.

On New Year's Day, 1942, we, still not believing it, stood on the pier of the French port

St. Nazaire, having spent nearly two years at sea.

Our odyssey is over. We have traveled over a hundred thousand nautical miles, having sunk 22 enemy ships. We stood on the pier, dirty, overgrown, emaciated, feral, frightened by the world from which we had been cut off for so long. Houses, streets, the noise of cars, women's laughter - all this looked so wild to us, as if we had not come from a sea raid, but had flown to earth from another planet.

The German boats arrived at St. Nazaire before the Italian ones, and Rogge met us together with the commanders of the naval base.

The war, which we had been hoping for an end to in the summer of the year before last, flared up more and more, and its outcome no longer promised us anything good.

EPILOGUE

Atlantis stayed on the high seas for 622 days, breaking all records for the duration of a military campaign in real war conditions. As already mentioned, 22 allied steamships with a total displacement of 145,700 gross tons became its victims.

Captain 1st rank Rogge was awarded the Knight's Cross, all crew members were awarded the Iron Crosses. March 1, 1943 Rogge was promoted to rear admiral and appointed commander of the training squadron, operating mainly in the Baltic.

March 1, 1945 Rogge became vice admiral. Holding his flag on the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen, Rogge with a detachment of large surface ships held back the advance of the Red Army in the Baltic States and Courland, led the evacuation of Koenigsberg. In May 1945 he surrendered to the Allies in Kiel.

Although in the actions of Rogge when he was the commander of the Atlantis, signs of war crimes are clearly visible, in particular, an attack on passenger ships, sometimes without warning, Rogge not only was not tried, but legally did not even become a prisoner of war, continuing to serve as part of a mixed allied commission engaged in the disarmament of the German fleet.

More, who was with Rogge throughout the war and rose to the rank of captain of the 3rd rank, was also not declared a prisoner of war. Moreover, Mohr was seconded to England in 1945 as a liaison officer coordinating efforts to demilitarize Germany.

From the Kriegsmarine of the Third Reich, Rogge smoothly flowed into the Bundesmarine of Germany, where from 1957 to 1962, with the rank of rear admiral, he commanded the naval district in Kiel. In 1962, Rogge retired and spent the rest of his life at his villa in the town of Reinbek near Hamburg, where he died on June 29, 1982 at the age of 83.

There is another story connected with the name of Admiral Rogge, which must be kept in mind, although it is difficult to vouch for its authenticity.

Being a pirate at heart, abandoned by the will of fate in the pragmatic 20th century, Bernard Rogge left behind legends that are very similar in content to those left by the famous pirates of the past - Captains Morgan, Flint and Kidd.

These are legends about hidden treasures. In the 20th century, these legends look somewhat different than, say, in the 17th century, but their essence does not change from this.

When leaving Königsberg in April 1945, Vice-Admiral Rogge ordered that many priceless historical treasures belonging to the Prussian kings, as well as numerous precious works, be loaded onto the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen. art stolen by the Nazis on the territory of the Soviet Union and Poland, including, by the way, the famous "Amber Room".

Being in full combat readiness, "Prince Eugen" surrendered to the Allies, made some incomprehensible flight to Copenhagen, and then was hastily handed over to the United States as a spoils of war.

In January 1946, the ship arrived in Norfolk, where it stayed until May, "carrying out various tests," according to official American history. Later, the cruiser was transferred to the Pacific Ocean and used in atomic tests at Bikini Atoll. We would not dwell in such detail on the fate of the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen, which, in principle, is well known, if not for one very piquant circumstance. After the war, Admiral John Newton, who was one of the assistants to the chief of naval operations in World War II, had a chance to visit the country mansion of Admiral Jonas Ingram, who commanded the US Atlantic Fleet during the war years.

"We went up to the second floor," recalls Newton, "where a vast room was all paneled with intricately carved amber.

"God, Jonas! I exclaimed, "where did you get this beauty?

"You won't believe it," Ingram laughed. "We found these panels while unloading the Prinz Eugen sometime in early 1946. Remember when he was brought from Germany to our east coast? They say they decorated one of Hitler's offices.

— Hitler? I asked. "Are you sure?"

"Not at all sure," Ingram admitted. It's a rumor and nothing more. But you must admit, whoever they belong to, they look lovely. It's not all here yet," Ingram continued. "I got about a third. Some we gave to Ernie (Perhaps Ingram meant Admiral Ernest King, Commander-in-Chief of the US Navy), and some were taken apart for souvenirs by the guys from my headquarters. Everyone wanted to boast of trophies supposedly from Hitler's office.

"It seems to me," I suggested, "that this thing is insanely expensive.

"I don't think so," Ingram shook his head. "The guys who fought in the north of Germany brought amber in whole backpacks and sold it to jewelers. About \$10 a pound."

This is how Drake and Morgan and many others bought their future. Perhaps Rogge did the same. What else did the Americans find while unloading the German heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen?

APPLICATION

Operational and tactical characteristics of the auxiliary cruiser "Atlantis"

Built: in 1937 at the Vulkan factory in Bremen.

Displacement in ballast: 7862 tons.

Main dimensions: 155 x 18.6 x 8.2 m.

Maximum speed: 17 knots.

Fuel supply: 3000 tons.

Cruising range: 60,000 nautical miles at 10 knots.

Armament: six 150-mm guns, one 75-mm gun, two 37-mm and four 20-mm anti-aircraft guns, four surface 533-mm torpedo tubes, 92 mines, one Arado seaplane.

Crew: 16 (+4 "prize") officers, 356 foremen and sailors.

3.BLOODY ADVENTURES OF THE POCKET BATTLESHIP "Admiral Scheer"

I

The captain of the first rank Theodor Kranke was appointed to the post of commander of the pocket battleship Admiral Scheer, when he had already twenty-seven years of service in the German fleet behind him. Kranke joined the Kaiser fleet in 1912, sailed on destroyers during the First World War, commanded a light cruiser during the years of the Weimar Republic, and later was the head of the Naval School.

The Admiral Scheer was the second of three ships built for the German navy under the Versailles treaty restrictions that any warship destined for the German navy must not displace more than 10,000 tons.

In reality, the total displacement of the Admiral Scheer was approaching 17,000 tons, which for some reason was overlooked by those who were supposed to oversee Germany's compliance with the terms of the Versailles Treaty. The ship had a length of 186 meters and was armed with six 280-mm guns with a barrel length of 54 calibers, placed in two three-gun turrets at the bow and stern.

The armament of the Admiral Scheer was supplemented by eight 150mm guns, six 105mm rapid-fire anti-aircraft guns, eight 37mm and six 20mm anti-aircraft guns, and eight 533mm torpedo tubes.

The three-shaft diesel power plant gave the Admiral Scheer the opportunity to reach speeds of up to 28 knots. The Admiral Scheer was laid down on June 25, 1931 at the naval shipyard in Wilhelmshaven, launched on April 1, 1933 and commissioned on November 12, 1933.

In total, the fleet included three ships of this type: Deutschland, Admiral Scheer and Admiral Count Spee. The question immediately arose: to which class of warships should this original trinity be attributed? They were called battleships, heavy cruisers, and pocket battleships. The last definition, despite some vulgarity, seemingly unacceptable in the strict canons of the classification of warships, accompanied this "pocket" trinity throughout the service, and then migrated to the pages of historical research ...

The order to appoint Captain First Rank Kranke as commander of the Scheer came on October 1, 1939, shortly after the start of the war. The handing over of the affairs of the head of the school took much more time than Kranke expected; it was not until November 1 that he arrived aboard the Scheer and raised his pennant, formally taking command of the pocket battleship.

The crew received the new commander warily. Everyone, of course, knew that in recent years he had been in charge of the school, and had reason to suspect that he was more of a scientist and naval theorist than the commander of a warship that was to fight with significantly superior enemy forces.

For the first months of his command, it was difficult for Captain First Rank Kranke to prove the opposite - the Scheer was mainly in the base, occasionally fighting off British air raids with anti-aircraft guns. Under the previous commander, Captain First Rank Heinrich Burmbach, the Scheer anti-aircraft gunners shot down one English bomber and were very proud of it. It is known that the commander always brings good luck to the ship, and therefore all the sailors of the Scheer asked themselves the question: will their ship be as lucky under the new commander as under the old one?

Meanwhile, the Admiral Scheer was docked, and Theodor Kranke was ordered to Berlin, where he was entrusted with the operational development of the Norwegian operation. The crew of the Scheer did not understand what their commander could do in Berlin for so long. However, they had something to do, so as not to ask each other such questions too often. Half of the sailors aboard the Scheer were young recruits who had recently replaced old-timers sent by instructors to various training detachments. Therefore, if the crew received the captain of the first rank Kranke with caution, then he did not feel very confident with such a large number of inexperienced recruits on the ship.

Until June 1940, Kranke was in Norway, managing the headquarters of the naval formation supporting the occupation of this country by German troops, and then returned to Wilhelmshaven and again took command of the Admiral Scheer. By this time, the ship had completed the repair and modification work, she left the dock and headed for the Baltic Sea for the usual post-repair tests. Then began a cycle of intensive combat training - it was time to turn the recruits into a cohesive and reliable crew of a warship. It was not an easy task at all, given the fact that the vast majority of sailors stepped on the deck of a ship for the first time in their lives. Training continued day and night.

In October 1940, "Admiral Scheer" arrived in Gotenhafen, where he began loading ammunition and all other types of supplies. Especially a lot of food was taken - mainly vegetables. The sailors even began to suspect that their new commander was a vegetarian.

Everyone wanted to know where the ship was going. A variety of rumors flew around the decks and cockpits, none of which, of course, could be confirmed. Almost no one on board believed that they would be sent on an ocean raid to fight English trade; they still remembered what had recently happened to their brother of the same type - "Admiral Count Spee". Perhaps, many assumed, they would be sent to Greenland for some sort of "bite and run" operation, but nothing more.

While rumors were circulating around the ship, only the commander knew the truth, as always. A three-page combat order, signed by Admiral Raeder, was already lying on Kranke's desk. Then the commander disappeared - again no one knows where. Some said that he had gone to Berlin to the headquarters of the war at sea, others saw him in Wilhelmshaven at the headquarters of the Naval Group North. Attempts to find out something new from the commander's messenger did not lead to anything, since he himself did not know anything. True, the news

accidentally managed to overhear a fragment of a conversation between the captain of the first rank Kranke and his two friends, who came to say goodbye to the commander of the Sheer. Collecting dishes from the table in the commander's cabin, the orderly heard the phrase of one of the officers, who said to Kranke: "You don't have a fifty-fifty chance. Rather, your odds can be viewed as one in ten. The British have recently managed to significantly improve the protection of their navigation in the ocean, and after the sinking of the Admiral Count Spee, the time of surface raiders in the ocean, it seems to me, is over.

On the evening of October 22, 1940, a group of sailors were released on leave ashore. On October 23, many were also preparing to go ashore, but already in the morning, at 08:30, the order was given to prepare to go to sea.

The senior officer of the Admiral Scheer, Captain 2nd Rank Gruber, reported to the commander that all personnel were on board.

- Attention! - sounded on the ship's broadcast. — We are testing loud ringing bells.

The shrill, nerve-racking sounds of the battle alert echoed through the ship. Multicolored flags hoisted from the pocket battleship's signal halyards. Two small stout tugboats, resembling two nutshells against the background of the slender hull of the battleship, easily took the Admiral Scheer away from the wall and, calling to each other with horns, led him to the exit from the port.

Having given the towing lines, "Admiral Scheer" went further under their cars, skirting the pier.

"So, gentlemen," Captain First Rank Kranke addressed his officers on the bridge, "we are on the high seas!"

We are on the high seas! - resounded throughout the ship, and everyone who was free from the watch jumped out on the upper deck to cast a farewell glance at their native shores. Everyone already knew that now the Sheer was going to sea for many months, and possibly forever.

Gotengafen quickly disappeared astern. Rounding Cape Hela, the Sheer saw a sailboat heading straight ahead under full sail, like a ghost from ancient times. It was a four-masted Padua, a training ship for the German merchant fleet. For the sailors of the Sheer, this was the last greeting from their homeland. At 13:30 the coast melted on the horizon. Only the wind still carried the smells of the autumn earth.

The weather remained excellent, which made Captain First Rank Kranke nervous. He would have preferred fog and rain, and wouldn't mind a big storm either. The weather officer promised uncertainly that if the weather began to deteriorate, it would not be until tomorrow.

Lieutenant Starzhinsky, standing on the quarterdeck, told his sailors that this was the sixth time he had passed through the Danish Strait, but the weather had never been so beautiful as today. But if for an experienced sailor the weather really seemed fine, then the young recruits did not find it at all. A large swell was going towards them, the ship was nodding and rocking heavily. The recruits trembled and turned pale, looked around frightenedly, as if someone could help them, looked hopefully at the officers. Some of the legs became wadded, and they sat down on the deck. Knowing from experience that in this case, harshness and even rudeness are the best medicine, the officers ordered the limp sailors to get up, pull themselves together, be more on the move and think less about their torment, concentrate on their duties. There is no better medicine.

The hardest time has come for the commander. He completely forgot about sleep, constantly

while on the bridge or in the chart room.

When passing through the Danish Strait, a meeting with the enemy could occur at any moment. Signalmen anxiously watched the sky and the horizon. Although the departure of "Admiral Scheer" from Gotenhafen was accompanied by the strictest secrecy measures, Poles lived in the city, who hated the Germans and were happy to supply British intelligence with any information. In addition, when passing the Belt, one should not forget about the Norwegian resistance, which had a stable radio connection with London.

- Plane, 225 - from the left side. Flying very low! came the cry of the signalman.

All binoculars turned in the indicated direction. The captain of the first rank Kranke at that moment, sitting on a hard leather sofa in the chart room, was trying to take a nap. Hearing the cry of the signalman, the commander jumped out onto the bridge and threw up his binoculars. The distance to the aircraft was already measured, and the barrels of all anti-aircraft guns began to move, slowly rising up. But the distance was still too great for opening fire. The plane could only be seen through very strong binoculars.

"It could be one of our reconnaissance aircraft," suggested Kranke, knowing that the fleet command had asked the Luftwaffe to provide air cover for the Admiral Scheer's breakthrough into the ocean. But at this distance, it was impossible to see any details. In addition, there was no certainty that the pilot of the aircraft, even if it was his own, would be able to identify the Admiral Scheer, since the Luftwaffe pilots practically did not know the silhouettes of their own ships.

"If he sees us as well as we see him," the commander remarked, "then I hope that at least he won't do anything stupid."

At that moment, a messenger from the radio room appeared on the bridge, handing the ship's commander a radiogram. Kranke read it and sighed. The radiogram said that the plane looming on the horizon was really its own. But, having discovered the Admiral Scheer, he mistook it for an enemy ship and transmitted by radio all the details about its course and speed. Of course, the pilot's radiogram was encoded, but the ciphers used by the Luftwaffe were much simpler than naval ones, since heavy and bulky cipher machines could not be placed on aircraft. Therefore, there was a fear that the enemy, if he intercepted the radiogram, would easily decipher it with all the ensuing consequences.

- The plane is coming! the signalman reported.

It was true. The plane approached, although it still preferred to keep a safe distance. However, now it could be easily identified. It was a Dornier 18 reconnaissance aircraft. To prevent the plane from foolishly doing some more stupid things, Kranke ordered the launch of identification rockets. Multi-colored lights rose swiftly into the sky and, slowly fading, sank to the surface of the sea. In response, a rocket was also fired from the plane, confirming that it was one of its own.

Twice more the Dornier 18 fired identification flares, and the Scheer answered them twice more before the plane dared to fly closer to the steel giant. From the bridge of the Scheer one could even see the faces of the pilots, they waved their hands.

Why are they all hovering over us? Kranke muttered displeasedly. "What if something happens to their engine?" Where do we put them then?

II

The sparkling ball of the sun slowly descended into the sea, but was eaten up by black and gray clouds before it reached the horizon. With the onset of darkness, the weatherman's forecast came true - the weather worsened (or improved, according to the commander).

The next day, until noon, Kranke kept a northwesterly course, and then, again relying on the forecaster's forecast, turned the ship west - in the direction of Greenland, hoping to break into the ocean under the cover of night. Clouds began to thicken in the sky. A piercing northwest wind brought blinding snowballs followed by torrential downpours. By evening, a fierce storm was already raging on the sea. "Admiral Scheer" heaved heavily on the waves, falling from side to side. The young sailors who had previously suffered from seasickness now resembled the living dead.

"This is just the beginning, guys," the old-timers urged them on. "If our forecaster is right, and he is rarely wrong, then a real polar hurricane will blow tonight. Then you will understand what the naval service means.

"But that's all nonsense," another "old man" laughed. - But when you walk around the "roaring forties", and then take a sip of storms at Cape Horn, then you will become real sailors ...

Huge waves, reminiscent of mountains in motion, fell upon the ship. The Admiral Scheer groaned and groaned under their blows, but stubbornly pushed forward at a speed of twenty knots.

In such conditions, the gunners could only be in the towers of the main caliber and at the anti-aircraft guns located on the upper tiers of the superstructures. No one could risk appearing on the upper deck without securing a rescue line. At the height of the storm, boatswain Hellgert noticed that the ammunition of one of the anti-aircraft guns was not properly sheltered from the waves crashing on the ship. Having tied one of his sailors with a lifeline, the boatswain sent him to restore order. But the sailor alone could not do anything. Then the boatswain, taking advantage of the lull that came for a moment, rushed to his aid, but just at that moment another giant wave hit the deck.

A little later, the commanders of the calculation of one of the anti-aircraft guns heard loud groans and saw something wriggling at the base of the aft turret of the main caliber. Having tied up the ends, the two gunners ventured down to the deck, where they found the crippled sailor in an unconscious state. The sailor was taken to the infirmary, where doctors discovered that both of his hips were broken. When the sailor came to his senses, he immediately asked about the boatswain, who jumped out onto the deck that had received the blow of the wave to help him.

The senior officer, who hurried down to the infirmary, immediately asked all combat posts and squads to see if boatswain Hellgert was there. The answer was negative.

The rescued sailor reported that the boatswain, despite the piercing cold, throwing off his pea coat to help him, jumped out onto the deck, where they together tried to secure the box with shells. At that moment, a wave hit the ship, the sailor was carried somewhere, hit something, he felt a terrible pain in his legs and no longer remembers anything. A quick check of the personnel showed that the boatswain Hellgert and a sailor named Rimke were missing. When this was reported to the bridge, the commander, despite the terrifying storm, immediately ordered to go back on course, and for half an hour, turning off the searchlights, they tried to find the unfortunate people in the raging sea from the Sheer. But everyone understood the hopelessness of these efforts. An icy sea, a wind blowing with the force of a hurricane,

gigantic waves did not give a single chance that anyone could survive in such conditions. Soon the search was terminated, and the Admiral Scheer returned to its previous course.

The crew suffered the first casualties, and despondency reigned on the ship. Meanwhile, the storm grew stronger every minute, and the captain of the first rank Kranke had to abandon his original intention to go around Iceland from the north, since on such a wave the ship could not go at a speed of twenty knots. Visibility was getting worse, and Kranke hoped that even after dawn the ship would be safely covered by snowballs, showers and fog.

By midnight, the storm reached hurricane strength, and the northwest wind first changed to the north, and then blew with the same force from the northeast. In principle, this suited Kranke very well, making it possible to slip through unnoticed, although the ship was so laid from side to side that many had the impression that the next wave would certainly turn it over. All navigational instructions demanded that in such conditions the ship be turned bow to the wave. In peacetime, Kranke would have done just that, but now he continued to follow the same course, exposing the side of the ship to the terrible waves. During this time, the Sheer was heavily iced over: the deck and superstructures were covered with a crust of ice. An order was given not to appear on the upper deck under any circumstances.

Even before dawn, the Admiral Scheer entered the Denmark Strait. Usually during the summer and autumn months the Denmark Strait is ice-free for a width of almost two hundred miles. But when a storm comes from the north, and even more so - a hurricane from the northeast - huge waves are not in able to break through the strait into the Greenland Sea. And something completely crazy begins. The waves, held back in the east by Iceland, and in the west by Greenland, rush to the center of the strait, colliding with each other and crushing each other, rising in this battle to a height of up to forty meters, trying to break out into the Atlantic as soon as possible. At the same time, giant waves move from all sides, arranging a terrible round dance in a narrow strait. It was through such a round dance that the Admiral Scheer tried to break into the Atlantic. Despite its solid size and powerful engines, the ship sometimes twisted like a chip among huge shafts, throwing it from side to side in all directions. The Admiral Scheer rose on steep waves, it seemed, to the very sky, then fell somewhere into a bottomless abyss, lay almost on board, but stubbornly continued to make its way to the south. Not only for young inexperienced sailors, but for many experienced sailors, all this seemed like an endless nightmare.

From time to time the inclinometer recorded a list of thirty-seven degrees, and even the experienced captains of the merchant fleet who were on board the Scheer began to look quite worried. The Sheer was not a merchant ship, and her heel ratio was much higher due to her heavy turrets and superstructures above the waterline. It's good that the "Admiral Scheer" was loaded to the very gunwale!

Chaos and destruction reigned in the living quarters, as after a hot battle. In the cockpits all the lockers were broken and overturned, in the cabins and wardrooms the furniture was broken and everything was turned upside down. Water gushed through the ventilation pipes, the plugs of which had long been knocked out. In the dry provisions battalion, the flour sacks already looked like soaked sacks of cement. There was water in almost all rooms of the ship. The only good news was that in this chaos of wind and waves, snowballs and low leaden clouds, it was unlikely that any enemy ship or aircraft could appear. Even if some English ships were patrolling in the strait, now they are probably hiding in the bays, or at least moving towards the wave, the last thing they think about is a possible meeting with the enemy. As for aviation, neither the Royal Air Force nor the Luftwaffe flew in such weather, and even if they did fly, they would still not have found anything with such low and continuous clouds.

Meanwhile, in addition to the sailor with broken hips, the infirmary began to receive

people with severe injuries. Even the commander himself badly injured his hand, trying to pick up the helmsman who was knocked down. And the senior officer, captain of the second rank, Grubber, was almost washed overboard. At the last moment, two sailors managed to save him. Everyone began to understand the meaning of the old sea proverb, which says that people are divided into three categories: the living, the dead, and those at sea.

At midnight, the ship's forecaster Defant came up to the bridge in a very cheerful disposition.

"So, gentlemen," he asked, "are you satisfied?"

"Everything is fine," the senior navigator, second-rank captain Gübner, muttered in response. "But you overdid it a little.

It was about two dead sailors washed overboard by the raging ocean elements.

Until dawn, the strength of the hurricane continued to increase, the strength of the wind reached eleven or twelve points. The impact of giant waves continued to shake the ship, and the whistle of the wind turned into a continuous shrill howl. However, towards the end of the night the storm began to subside - gradually, very slowly, almost imperceptibly.

When a gray cold dawn broke in the east, the storm became much weaker, at last there was an opportunity to remove water from the below-deck rooms and restore order there. The weather improved and the barometer slowly went up. A storm was still raging, but it was no longer a hurricane - the wind strength rarely reached 10 points. The sailors, tied with safety lines, went to the upper deck to determine the damage caused by the night hurricane. Damage and breakdowns were discovered at every turn. Two boats were wrecked. One was torn off a crane beam and smashed to pieces. Now all that was left of it was good only for kindling. The second boat was also badly damaged, but the ship's carpenter, having examined it, promised that he would try to repair the boat.

Visibility still did not exceed three hundred meters, and the Sheera radar station searched the horizon in all directions. A few hours after the narrowest part of the strait was passed, the radar picked up a moving object - no doubt a ship - at a distance of six to seven thousand meters. Kranke ordered to turn a couple of points to the west in order to increase the distance. It happened at 15:00. The ship discovered appears to have been a British auxiliary cruiser that was on guard duty in the strait.

Toward evening, the weather improved markedly, and the next morning the Arctic hurricane turned into just a strong breeze with wind gusts sometimes reaching six or seven points. As the ice mountains of Greenland were left behind,

noticeably warmer.

Meanwhile, the ship passed through the Danish Strait and entered the North Atlantic, where it could no longer be afraid of being discovered by British air reconnaissance. Only later, after America's entry into the war, when the battle for the Atlantic was in full swing, did American and British reconnaissance planes constantly fly over this area, not for a minute taking their eyes off the oncoming transatlantic convoys.

On Sunday, November 3, the Atlantic greeted the Admiral Scheer with the rays of an already forgotten sun, which painted the foamy waves in a pale gold color. By noon, the ship was at latitude fifty, and the captain of the first rank Kranke again turned the Admiral Scheer to the north. Although the Scheer itself in the vastness of the Atlantic looked like a microscopic needle in a giant haystack, he had the opportunity to comb this stack very wide

front. A large group of specialists in radio interception and decryption operated on the ship, headed by a captain of the second rank Budde. The group also included Lieutenants Pal and Wojciechowski-Emden. The latter was the son of a naval officer who died on the famous World War I raider, the cruiser Emden, for which his family received permission to add the word Emden to their surname.

German naval intelligence had long ago determined the approximate time and frequency of the HX convoys, that is, the convoys that formed in Halifax and brought military equipment to the British Isles in a stream. But, despite the great work done by the scouts, it was not possible to determine the course of the convoys, although it was found that these courses change at irregular intervals. It was possible to find out that the anti-submarine guard begins to operate from about the twentieth degree of western longitude. How else the protection of convoys changes as they cross the Atlantic remained unknown. According to the available data, two convoys - HX-83 and HX-84 - were supposed to pass through the area where the Admiral Scheer was ordered to operate. Kranke's task was to search for and make combat contact with any of these convoys on the north or south course.

Any intercepted signal that gave any hint of the convoy's whereabouts could be invaluable. However, the broadcast was silent. Apparently, all enemy naval forces in the area, about which, by the way, nothing was known either, as well as all merchant ships, had the strictest instructions to completely observe radio silence. The area in which Scheer was to search lay between latitudes fifty-second and fifty-four degrees north and longitudes thirty-second and thirty-five degrees west. Kranke was sure that it was in this area that they would be able to find one of the convoys.

Meanwhile, as Kranke successfully navigated the Denmark Strait through a completely unthinkable storm, his credibility among the crew grew significantly, reduced to the general opinion that "we will not be lost with the old man."

As the Admiral Scheer searched for convoys, the off-watch men engaged in a heated debate over the all-important question of growing beards or not, bearing in mind that after returning home they would have to be shaved one way or another. The controversy embraced both sailors and officers. The commander laughed it off: "When we return home, your beards will drag along the deck ..."

But then the signalmen found the tops of someone's masts on the horizon, and the commander himself climbed up to the fore-mast to get a better look at them. The distance was very great. A sudden flash of a rainbow made it impossible to see anything at all, except for the surface of the sea and clouds. But after a couple of minutes the masts appeared again. The ship to which they belonged seemed to be on a westerly course. The commander was silent, only nodded his head when the signalman reported on the new appearance of the masts. Approaching the discovered vessel, the Sheer soon discovered that it was a lone tanker sailing empty to the west.

Finally, Kranke broke his long silence and ordered, turning to the navigator:

- Back to the old course.

The officers and sailors who stood watch on the bridge stared at the commander in amazement. Is the fight against enemy shipping not their main task? Why does the commander let this ship get away? Moreover, this is a tanker, the most valuable type of merchant ships!

Of course, no one uttered a word, but the captain of the first rank Kranke perfectly understood what questions his subordinates wanted to ask him.

"I understand what you're thinking," the commander said. One swallow does not make summer. We must locate the convoy. If we sink this tanker now, we will only reduce our chances of finding other enemy ships.

And, turning to the senior officer, he ordered to explain this to the crew on the ship's broadcast. This is what an experienced fisherman does, throwing a small fish back into the water so as not to frighten the big one.

III

On Monday the weather was very good. Those free from watch gathered on the upper deck, basking in the sun, reading and dozing.

In the afternoon, another ship was sighted on a westerly course, and again Kranke decided not to change course, letting her get away.

On the Admiral Scheer, tension grew from the expected events. Everyone understood that very soon, perhaps within a few hours, something was going to happen. A stubborn rumor circulated around the ship, which even Captain Gruber himself did not dare to refute, that tomorrow, Tuesday, November 5, the Admiral Scheer would make combat contact with the enemy. In other words, the convoy will be found tomorrow.

This rumor had a solid basis: all calculations based on intelligence data indicated that the HX-84 convoy would be in the exact area where the Admiral Scheer would enter on Tuesday.

Forecaster Defant was called to the bridge, where the commander jokingly asked him:

- If this is not a military secret, Defant, then tell me, what kind of weather does your department promise for tomorrow morning?

"Tomorrow morning," the forecaster promised, "there will be a light wind, calm seas and good visibility. But a low-pressure front is moving towards us, of course, with an accompanying storm. But it won't reach us until the day after tomorrow.

The evening was absolutely wonderful. The setting sun dyed the sky and sea gold, purple and blue. When the sun sank below the horizon, there was complete silence on the Admiral Scheer, broken only by the measured rumble of diesel engines. People were calm and psychologically ready to fight and face any danger.

On the morning of November 5, the weather turned out to be exactly the same as the forecaster had promised the day before. Lieutenant Pitch, the pilot of the airborne aircraft, was called to the bridge. Pitch was a naval officer who wanted to become a pilot, and he became one. He would later return to his first love, the sea, and die on August 24, 1944, commanding the submarine U-344.

"Good morning, Pitch," Kranke greeted him. — How do you like the weather? You can take a chance fly a little.

- If you provide me with a "pond for ducks", commander, - the pilot replied, - then everything will be in order.

"Pond for ducks" was called an artificially created area of calm water, for which the ship, sharply putting the rudder, went out into the wind.

- No questions! - the commander agreed. - Of course, we will build a pond. But we hope that when you return, you will bring us some fresh news about the convoy.

When Lieutenant Pitch descended from the bridge, his Arado reconnaissance aircraft, better known as the "ship parrot", was already on the catapult. Pitch and his lookout Gallinat quickly climbed into their cabs and closed the lights. Their ground staff, if such a definition is possible on the ship, quickly checked the motor and floats of the seaplane, and the torpedomen, who also served the catapult, checked the compressed air cylinders.

Motor "Arado" earned, quickly entering the takeoff mode. In the cramped cockpit, Lieutenant Pitch raised his hand. A short command followed, an explosive blow of compressed air was heard, and the Arado confidently took to the air.

Gaining altitude, the scout made a circle over the ship. Everyone on the upper deck waved and saw Lieutenant Pitch wave back. The plane then went west.

At 11:20 the Arado returned.

The pilots found nothing. There was nothing to report.

They carefully combed the sector that Captain First Rank Kranke had pointed out to them, but found no one. The Arado was launched into the air again - to conduct a search in a new sector, to the south. The plane was supposed to return at 13:00, but already at 12:40 the signalmen noticed it flying towards the ship. That the seaplane was returning early was a good sign in itself. In addition, Pitch shook his wings as he approached, and then gave a light coded signal: "Eighty-eight nautical miles." The tense faces of the officers on the bridge cleared. By some magic, the news instantly swept through the entire ship: "A convoy is ahead!" Everyone was waiting for what the commander would say now, for only he could make the final decision. And only he was responsible for the decision. Moreover, the commander was responsible for a powerful warship and for one thousand three hundred human lives. All circumstances had to be taken into account.

However, now the sailors of the Sheer had to solve a more prosaic problem: how to take on board the returned Arado in a significantly increased excitement. The ship turned around, creating a "pond", the pilot made a circle, and then began to descend into a small area of calm water. The floats, in a cascade of silver spray, touched the surface, the Arado jumped like a frightened rabbit at the sight of a ditch, jumped again, then glided smoothly over the surface of the sea. Operating the engine at low speed, Lieutenant Pitch brought the seaplane under the protection of the port side of the ship and stopped right under the deck crane.

The pilot climbed out of the cockpit onto the hood, caught a crane cable and tried to hook on a special eye on the fuselage of the aircraft. But it was not there. The Arado bounced and rocked like a drunk. Dozens of heads, hanging over the gunwale, gave the pilot all sorts of advice. Finally, the hook was hooked, and the crane, easily tearing the Arado off the surface of the water, lifted it on board and placed it exactly on the catapult. The Ship Parrot returned to its perch.

Lieutenant Pitch jumped out of the cockpit and rushed to the bridge, a map-slate in his hand. On the map, along with different colored lines, one was striking - bold red. She was immediately noted by the keen eyes of the deck sailors when the pilot ran past them. The sailors exchanged winks - it was quite clear that the excited Pitch was carrying some very important information to the bridge. On the bridge, Captain First Rank Kranke was calm and silent. For him, the information delivered by the pilot was only the beginning. Everything was

not at all as simple as it seemed to his young subordinates rushing into battle.

"Thank you, Pitch," said Kranke. "You did a great job.

The convoy that Lieutenant Pitch had discovered was eighty-eight miles straight ahead of the Scheer. Going the same course, "Admiral Scheer" needed more than three hours to be in the visibility zone of the convoy. And if we also take into account the time lost when taking on board the Arado, contact with the convoy could not have occurred before 16:00, that is, shortly before dark. This meant that most of the convoy ships had a chance to disperse and hide in the dark.

However, on the other hand, if Kranke decided to postpone the operation until tomorrow morning, that is, if he allowed the convoy to proceed east all night without any interference, then the convoy would very dangerously approach the so-called Western Approaches, where it would certainly be met and taken further to the British ports warships of the English fleet. Coming into contact with them was not at all part of the plans of Captain First Rank Kranke, especially since the German naval intelligence did not know anything about the composition and number of escort ships.

Experience suggested that an enemy convoy usually traveled at seven to nine knots. Therefore, by 06:00 the next morning—the earliest hour that an attack can be made without interference from poor visibility—the convoy will be about a hundred miles east of where it is now. The captain of the first rank Kranke believed that the zone where the warships of the English fleet met the ships of the convoy was about three hundred miles from the current location of the Admiral Scheer. This means that the next morning the English formation will be only two hundred miles from the Sheer - a distance that a fast cruiser can cover in about six hours, even in stormy weather.

In addition to all these operational-tactical calculations, the commander also took into account the weather forecaster's forecast of the approaching low-pressure front. The wind was already beginning to freshen up, and the excitement on the sea had noticeably increased. The Defant believed that a storm was coming that would last for several days. And although the Sheer had ultra-modern artillery systems installed, and the gunners were well trained, a strong storm, no doubt, would greatly reduce the accuracy of fire and the speed of the ship. After carefully weighing all the pros and cons, the captain of the first rank Kranke decided to attack the convoy as soon as possible, that is, today.

From the moment the Arado was taken on board, the Sheer was already in full swing to rendezvous with the convoy. It was time for lunch in the saloon. Excited youth almost could not eat, anticipating the fight. Seasoned veterans, on the other hand, ate heartily, knowing full well from experience that it would be impossible to eat during the battle. No one can say how long the attack will last. Even the commander. All combat units were preparing for battle. Handrails were lowered, body kits were removed, photographs of wives and brides were removed from the bulkheads.

At 2:27 p.m., signalmen reported the discovery of a dirty patch of coal smoke on the horizon. Loud battle bells sounded throughout the ship, announcing a combat alert. But why only one spot of smoke? Where are the other eight ships that Lieutenant Pitch reported? Maybe he was wrong? And his watcher too? This is unlikely. Both were experienced and reliable officers. Sometimes it happens that in the eyes it doubles, but it doesn't go nine! Captain First Rank Kranke was also puzzled, although he did not doubt the veracity of Lieutenant Pitch's report. In any case, it is clear that this is not yet contact with the convoy.

"Either it's the famous cat that walks by itself," Kranke suggested, "or it's the British auxiliary cruiser that goes ahead of the convoy to warn the transports of any danger.

There were many more "or"s, and silence reigned on the bridge of the Scheer. Between

meanwhile, the distance between the pocket battleship and the unknown ocean wanderer was reduced so much that the mysterious steamer was able to be seen quite well. It was an ordinary merchant ship with no discernible features, plodding heavily through the leaden waters of the Atlantic like a lone vagrant.

"Not a very large ship," one of the bridge officers remarked.

"Five thousand tons at the most," agreed another.

Captain First Rank Kranke lowered his hands with binoculars.

"It doesn't look like an auxiliary cruiser," the commander said and, turning to the representative of naval intelligence, captain second rank Budde, asked, "what do you think, Budde?"

"As far as we know," the scout replied, "the British do not convert such small vessels into auxiliary cruisers.

"As far as we know," Kranke repeated. "Unfortunately, we know far from everything. Knowing that we know this, they will take and make a small ship a cruiser.

The ship peacefully continued to follow its course, but it was precisely this that aroused the greatest suspicions in the captain of the first rank Kranke.

The commander of the Scheer knew that the British Admiralty had given the strictest instructions to the captains of all merchant ships upon sighting any warship - even their own - to immediately change course and report this fact by radio. The same ship, whose signalmen must have already noticed the Scheer, did not change course and did not report anything on the radio.

"All signalers should carefully monitor the appearance of torpedo tracks," Kranke ordered, "increase all-round observation of the sky and horizon.

If the discovered steamer was not in fact an auxiliary cruiser, then its captain must have mistook the Admiral Scheer for an English or American warship, since he could not imagine the appearance of a large German warship in the center of the Atlantic. He still did not change course and maintained radio silence, but raised the flag of the British merchant marine.

"Excellent," Kranke approved. "At least now we know what country he belongs to." But did he recognize us? Can he do us any harm? Maybe he's waiting for us to come closer so he can fire torpedoes at us?

Kranke ordered to raise a signal on the international code: "Stop." Two signal flags flew over the fore-masts of the Admiral Scheer, from where they should be clearly visible from the steamer.

Then, from the Sheer, a signal light transmitted an order to the British not to use the radio station. The signal flashed twice, but the only reaction on the English ship was that the British gunners rushed aft to the gun installed there.

"Give him a warning shot on course!" Kranke ordered, lowering the binoculars.

Three times the deck of the Sheer shuddered from a gunshot, and three fountains of water rose dangerously close to the English steamer.

- Would you like to prepare a prize team? - the senior navigator, captain of the second rank Gübner, turned to Kranke.

"No, Huebner," replied Kranke. "We don't have time." Every second counts - you need to go to the convoy. We will just drown them.

And gave the order:

- Raise the signal: leave the ship, lower the boats!

While the signal was raised, the captain of the first rank Kranke watched the second hand of his watch. Will the British obey? The hand slowly counted down the long seconds. The tension grew.

The turrets and guns on the starboard side were aimed at the small steamer. Nothing unexpected happened. Soon the first boat was launched, which, having raised the spray, then swayed on the waves. It was followed by the second and third boats. Then, slowly, the British sailors began to row in the direction of the Sheer. This slowness infuriated Kranke, he could not take the British on board before sinking their ship.

But now the crowded lifeboats were between the Admiral Scheer and her target. Kranke ordered to move a little forward to get into a free line of fire, and the Admiral Scheer opened fire with 105-millimeter anti-aircraft guns. The guns fired volley after volley, almost all the shells hit the ship's waterline, and, finally, it began to slowly (very slowly, according to the Sheer commander) list to the port side.

"Maybe hit the deck?" - suggested the senior artilleryman. - To give the air the opportunity to get out of the holds. The water that goes through the waterline apparently creates air cushions.

"Excellent, Schumann," Kranke agreed. "Go ahead!"

The first volleys led to a strong explosion on the upper deck of the ship, debris flew into the air, and a fire broke out. The ship began to roll faster, sinking into the water. The English flag still fluttered at the stern.

While all this was going on, boats with English sailors approached the Sheer. They were all wearing English life jackets with stiff collars to support their heads so they wouldn't choke if they lost consciousness. Many smoked, apparently thinking that this was their last cigarette. The first boat approached the Scheer's stern from the starboard side, and the German sailors began to help their British "colleagues" to move to the deck of the pocket battleship.

It turned out that the English sailors were so shocked by the appearance of the Sheer that they left their ship without taking even the most necessary things with them. Everyone was in working overalls, and the stokers jumped upstairs dirty and grimy, straight from the furnaces. Only one of the sailors, who looked much older than the rest, was dressed in a naval tunic with rows of badges. Apparently, the sad, but similar experience of the First World War told him that he must be prepared for all sorts of surprises.

The British captain was in the third boat. The skin of his face was tanned by the winds of many seas and oceans, thick eyebrows hung over gray eyes. But the expression on his face was open and sincere. Only a slight smile played on his lips. Apparently, he was flattered that such a giant as the Admiral Scheer behaved so timidly before approaching his ship, which the experienced eye of the captain could not fail to notice. Or perhaps he was sure that he would not have to enjoy German hospitality for long, knowing how many English combat

ships are nearby. Next to the captain was a senior mechanic, dressed in a tunic with four stripes. He examined the Scheer with sincere technical interest, without at all resembling a defeated and captured one. And their ship still refused to sink, and Kranke ordered to increase the fire. At this time, the English captain waved his hands and shouted:

- Do not shoot at the stern! There's ammunition!

The German officers did not understand anything. The steamer was at a sufficient distance from the Admiral Scheer so that the explosion of ammunition did not cause any damage to the pocket battleship. But the senior gunner Schumann, looking at the stern, understood everything: the British flag was still flying there, and the captain wanted his ship to go to the bottom under his native flag.

From the ship's documents brought on board the Sheer by the English captain, it turned out that the steamer was called the Mopan. It had a carrying capacity of 5389 gross register tons and was a refrigerator. The Mopan was heading from the West Indies to England. The ship was built in 1928 and was still quite new, had, like all refrigerators, good speed. For this reason, the captain, according to him, refused to follow as part of a slow-moving convoy, deciding to get to England on his own.

IV

Soon the news flashed through the Scheer again: smoke was again detected on the horizon. Moreover, it was not about one spot of smoke, as on the eve. First, smoke spots from four ships were detected, then six, and a little later, several more smokes. It was, of course, a long-awaited convoy. If unprecedented excitement reigned at the combat posts, then everyone on the bridge was absolutely calm. "Admiral Scheer" walked without changing either course or speed, so as not to prematurely betray her intentions.

Kranke climbed up the fore-mast again to get a better view of the picture before him.

"There are more than half a dozen of them," the commander said, not taking his binoculars off his eyes. "Ten, at least, and even more.

And to Lieutenant Petersen, a former captain in the merchant marine, he thought he could see the smoke of at least twenty ships. At 16:30 "Scheer" increased speed, rushing to the attack. A forest of masts of merchant ships of various types was already visible on the horizon.

Are they going without cover at all? asked Kranke, more to himself than to the signalers. "I don't see a single warship."

"Something really is not visible," Lieutenant Petersen agreed with the commander. "But there is one suspicious one. He has some kind of unusual superstructure for a merchant ship.

Kranke also drew attention to this ship and carefully examined it through binoculars.

"Yes, it looks very much like an auxiliary cruiser," said the commander of the Sheer. "Look, he's breaking down. They have noticed us!

Kranke was absolutely right - they were discovered. A suspicious ship, more like a passenger steamer than a cargo ship, blinked its searchlight, continuously transmitting the letter

"A".

- This is not a signal light of a merchant ship, - said the navigator. - This is a searchlight of a warship. See how powerful he is!

"There is no doubt that this is an auxiliary cruiser," Kranke confirmed. He kept his eyes on this ship, which, having broken down, began to go into the head of the convoy in order to get into a better position to protect the merchant ships that stretched along the entire line of the southern horizon.

"He'll give you his ID now," said Kranke.

The commander wanted the enemy to have doubts about the nationality of the Scheer for as long as possible, so that he could get closer to the convoy before opening fire. At this point, the distance between the Scheer and the British auxiliary cruiser was still about fifteen miles.

The searchlight of the British auxiliary cruiser, transmitting the letter "A", suddenly flashed in rapid succession: "M" - "A" - "D". The Scheer's signalers immediately blinked back "MAG", but the ploy failed. It was not possible to deceive the commander of the British auxiliary cruiser. He apparently knew well that there could be no British warships in the area, and whole garlands of red rockets soared into the sky from his superstructure. There was no doubt—it must have been a prearranged signal for the convoy to disperse. And immediately the auxiliary cruiser and all the ships of the convoy began to put up a smoke screen.

The distance between the two ships was reduced to ten miles, and the Scheer, which had been heading straight for the convoy, now swerved to port to be able to hit the enemy with broadsides. The turret guns turned to the auxiliary cruiser, and the auxiliary caliber guns were aimed at the tanker, which turned out to be closest to the Scheer. The British auxiliary cruiser, which at that moment was at the head of the second column of the convoy, stopped working with a searchlight. By this time, the ships had already approached enough so that the commander of the English ship could already understand exactly with whom military fate brought him together. The characteristic silhouette of the Scheer was beautifully projected against the evening sky, and its three-gun turrets were clearly visible, aimed at the British ship.

The first reaction of the English commander was an attempt to put his ship between the Scheer and a large double-tube passenger steamer, apparently the most valuable ship in the convoy.

The Scheer was now less than ten miles from the auxiliary cruiser, and Kranke ordered one of the turrets to begin zeroing in order to determine the exact distance.

It was 16:42. When the Scheer's main battery guns opened fire, the ship exploded as it did recently during a terrible storm in the Danish Strait. A deafening roar hit the deck of the ship. Those who did not bother to plug their ears felt as if their eardrums had burst, becoming deaf for several days. The signalmen on Fore Mars were knocked off their feet. Heavy shells whistled off the side of the British auxiliary cruiser, still firing red flares into the sky. These rockets unnerved Kranke. Perhaps, with these missiles, the auxiliary cruiser not only orders the ships of the convoy to disperse, but also calls for help warships that are on the other side of the convoy and are still invisible from the Scheer?

Those twenty-three seconds that were necessary for the shells were languidly long.

"Sheera" to reach the target. They fell short, sending up huge fountains of water that temporarily hid the enemy auxiliary cruiser from view.

A second, corrected salvo came from both turrets of the pocket battleship, and at the same time, gun flashes of a return salvo flashed on the prow, superstructure and stern of the auxiliary cruiser. And although it became clear from these flashes how weakly armed the enemy was, the fact that he returned fire at all indicated that his crew, true to the maritime traditions of their country, was ready to fight to the end with any enemy, no matter how strong he was. was.

The English shells fell far short of range, except for one that fell so close to the Scheer that the spray from the column of water it raised hit the deck. It immediately became clear that the British had only one gun capable of firing at such a distance that there was no central aiming on the auxiliary cruiser, and all the guns fired independently, independently of each other.

The ether raged with messages transmitted in cipher and clear text. A few minutes later, the messages were confirmed in clear text by the American radio station Mackay, relaying them around the world, who immediately learned that a thousand miles east of the Newfoundland Bank, a German pocket battleship had attacked an allied convoy.

The second volley of the Sheer also fell into the sea - this time by flight. The British auxiliary cruiser was now about eighteen thousand meters from the Sheer. He was too small a target to shoot from that distance. To the naked eye, he was seen as a small pencil floating on the surface of the sea. The third volley of the Scheer also fell short of the target, raising huge columns of water. The fourth one too.

Now the Sheer was fired not only by the auxiliary cruiser, but also by many ships of the convoy. Some of them, as it turned out, were armed with 100-millimeter and even 150-millimeter guns, whose shells posed a serious danger even for such a heavy ship as the Sheer. It's also good that no one controlled their fire, and the distance was solid. The shooting was carried out more to demonstrate their courage than out of a desire to inflict any damage on the enemy.

Finally, in the fifth salvo, a heavy 280-mm shell from the Sheer hit right in the middle of the British auxiliary cruiser. The shell exploded in the superstructure, and soon the enemy ship was engulfed in flames. However, the flaming auxiliary cruiser continued to move, trying to get close to the Sheer. The purpose of this valiant maneuver was clear: the British commander was trying to divert the Scheer towards himself, away from the convoy. But it failed. The Scheer did not change course.

Of course, the British commander was well aware of the hopeless situation in which his ship, an armed passenger steamer, fell, but he continued to fire on the Scheer, apparently hoping that, being under fire, he would not approach the convoy before drowning the auxiliary cruiser. In addition, there was always a chance of a successful hit, and the auxiliary cruiser itself was too large to be quickly launched to the bottom even by the 280-mm Sheer guns.

The Scheer's turret guns were now firing rapidly. Shells rained down around the English ship. The Scheer was completely shrouded in yellow gunpowder smoke, so dense that it sometimes covered the target, and it was difficult for people in open posts to breathe.

The British auxiliary cruiser was now on fire from bow to stern, but she continued on her course, trailing thick black smoke behind her. The valiant ship continued to fight, although its fire weakened every minute. Soon the fire continued

only his stern weapon. How the gunners of this gun, amid the flames and explosions of heavy shells, continued to fire fairly accurately, none of the observers from the Admiral Scheer could understand. None of them yet knew the name of this ship - "Jervis Bay" or the names of its commander - Captain First Rank Fidzhen, but it was clear to everyone that the immortal traditions of Admiral Nelson were alive on this ship. The commander, apparently, had such authority with his crew that they were ready to follow him even into a hopeless battle and fight to the end.

No one on the Sheer also knew that the very first hit of a shell in the English auxiliary cruiser, its commander was seriously injured. One of his legs was torn off, and the other was crippled. The doctor bandaged the stump of his leg and gave him an injection of morphine. When the ship had already lost speed, and all the guns, except for the stern, were broken, the captain of the first rank Fidzhen crawled to the stern and there controlled the fire of the last surviving gun.

Debris, smoke, and flames from the explosions of heavy shells rose above the masts of the auxiliary cruiser Jervis Bay, but amid the death and destruction that reigned everywhere, the stern gun continued to fire.

The second target, a tanker, also received several hits from secondary caliber shells, and a fire broke out on it. But the gunners soon lost sight of him, as the burning Jervis Bay was between the ships.

The tanker took advantage of this and, changing course, disappeared into the smoke screen. Then the 150-millimeter guns of the Sheer found a new target for themselves - a small, about three thousand tons, bulk carrier, which, hiding in a smoke screen, fired furiously at the Sheer from the stern gun. On the Sheer, they decided that this steamer was also not an ordinary merchant ship, but one of the special convoy cover ships. It was he who put the smoke curtain in which the tanker disappeared. Several shells fell close to this ship, but it was not possible to achieve a direct hit.

Then, irritated, Crancke ordered all guns to be concentrated on the damaged auxiliary cruiser Jervis Bay, which, despite its position, continued to fire stubbornly and accurately from the only surviving gun. Several shells hit the stern of the English ship, and it began to noticeably settle in the water. But he fired, and the British battle flag fluttered from the mast among the flames. But the end was approaching: the stern gun fell silent. The cars stopped, and the Jervis Bay quickly sank, taking the fallen heroes with it.

Kranke ordered the fire to be transferred to the transport closest to the Scheer. The pocket battleship changed course and headed to catch up with the convoy ships scattered in the ocean. A large twin-tube passenger steamer was still visible to starboard of the bow in the smoke and fog, and, chasing after it, the Sheer left the burning wreckage of the Jervis Bay behind the stern.

"I wonder if their commander survived?" Kranke asked, looking at the dying remains of the Jervis Bay, although he knew that none of the crew of the valiant auxiliary cruiser had any chance of not being saved. (Later, Captain First Rank Fidzhen was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. The auxiliary cruiser Jervis Bay, a former passenger steamer with a carrying capacity of 14,164 gross register tons, was lost along with Captain First Rank Fidzhen, Commodore of the convoy Admiral Mantby and with the vast majority of her crew. By a whim of fate captain of the first rank Figen, who died under German shells, was exactly the same person who, a few years earlier, commanding the cruiser Suffolk, saved the lives of fourteen German sailors from the crew of the Hedwig, which had landed on reefs off the Philippine Islands on the way from China. life, Fidzhen and his subordinates took the German sailors aboard their ship.)

For exactly 22 minutes and 22 seconds, the heroic Jervis Bay (named after one of the bays in New South Wales) diverted all the firepower of a pocket battleship.

In November, darkness sets in early in these latitudes. It was already getting dark, and visibility had deteriorated sharply. Kranke now ordered all fire to be concentrated on the large passenger steamer, whose radio call sign later made it possible to determine its name - the Rangitiki liner, with a displacement of 16,698 tons. (This liner was of the same type as the famous auxiliary cruiser Rawalpindi, later sunk by the Scharnhorst, and the Rangitani, sunk in the Pacific by the German auxiliary cruisers Komet and Orion.)

Kranke believed that the "Rangitiki" is a military transport. Changing speeds and courses, "Rangitiki" tried to get away from the "Sheer" with a fox, but with the first volley, the gunners of the "Sheer" achieved a direct hit in the stern of the liner. But then the Rangitiki disappeared into the smoke veil.

For good luck, the captain of the second rank Schumann fired another volley into a cloud of smoke, hoping that a couple more shells would hit the liner. But there was no way to be sure.

A little later, the Sheer radio operators intercepted a radio message with a call for help, transmitted from the Rangitika. The American radio station Makei confirmed the reception of the radio message and informed the whole world that the English passenger steamer Rangitiki had been attacked by a German ship of the Graf Spee type at the point 52 ° 50` north latitude and 32 ° 50 west longitude.

After the disappearance of the Rangitika, the turret guns of the Admiral Scheer shifted their fire to another ship, which was barely visible in the fog, and the auxiliary caliber guns fired at a small steamer, about three thousand tons of displacement.

It was already quite dark. In addition, the changed wind drove wisps of a smoke screen directly onto the Sheer, closing the targets. None of the targets were hit directly. At 17:11, a ship with a displacement of about ten thousand tons was found to the right of the bow, and Kranke ordered all fire to be concentrated on it. Shells of all calibers hit the unfortunate ship, which immediately broke out on fire. Sparks flew into the air in all directions. Luminous dotted lines of tracer shells were moving in gentle trajectories towards the target through the thickening darkness. The ship began to list, slowly at first, then faster and faster. Suddenly, the steamer tumbled aboard, sinking astern. The fire raging on the ship allowed the signalmen from the Sheer to clearly see all the details of this tragedy. Soon the ship sank, and impenetrable darkness fell again, as if someone had turned off all the lights. Meanwhile, the auxiliary artillery of the Sheer transferred fire to a tanker of about six thousand tons of displacement, which had already been fired on earlier. A fire raged on the tanker, but it, albeit slowly, continued to move. Not a soul was to be seen on board. The team, apparently, had already left the tanker across the side opposite from the Sheer.

The guns of the main caliber also joined the shelling of the tanker, and within one or two minutes the ship sank, sinking with its bow.

Continuing the search, "Scheer" rushed at full speed into the thick darkness.

"There's some kind of shadow straight ahead!" signalmen reported.

"Another shadow next to the first!"

The first shadow materialized into a ship with a carrying capacity of about ten thousand gross register tons. The second shadow appears to have been a tanker about

fourteen thousand tons. The artillery of the Scheer's auxiliary caliber first opened intense fire on the lesser of the two targets, a cargo steamer sitting deep in the water, either from overload or from a hit already received. The tanker, suddenly foaming the water astern, turned and began to leave at high speed, putting up a smoke screen.

The towers of the Sheer gave him a volley after him. A few seconds later, a huge mass of flame shot up into the night sky. Then tongues of fire engulfed the entire ship from bow to stern. The flames licked its masts, pipes and superstructures. Then, one by one, the oil tanks began to explode.
tanks.

Rockets were fired from the bridge of the tanker, scattering across the night sky. It was not known whether the tanker gave signals to other ships of the convoy, or whether the rockets fired automatically from the fire?

From the bridge of the Scheer, they saw how the tanker began to go into the water on an even keel, and they transferred fire on a dry cargo ship of ten thousand tons, on which a small fire was visible. The guns of the main and auxiliary caliber of the Sheer opened fire on him, and after two volleys, the Sheer left the target. The steamer, blazing, fell aboard.

And again there was darkness and complete silence. At a speed of twenty-one knots, the Scheer began to comb the area in search of new targets. Again, a shadow was found, which turned out to be a bulk carrier of about seven thousand gross register tons, which, apparently, was already sinking.

Kranke studied the ship through binoculars for some time, thinking about something. The bridge was as silent as an operating room.

Are the searchlights ready? the commander asked.

- Yes sir!

"Illuminate the target with searchlights and open fire!" Kranke ordered.

— There are open fire! - Reported the captain of the second rank Schumann. - Open the spotlights!

A powerful beam of light cut through the darkness and stopped on the ship, doomed to stand just two miles from the Sheer. It showed figures of people running down the ladder from the bridge and scurrying around the wheelhouse.

These people knew that their ship was doomed. It was hard to miss at that distance, and shortly after the opening of fire, debris flew in all directions, masts collapsed overboard, and steam poured from broken pipes and pipelines. The bridge was destroyed and partly blown overboard, the steel sheets of the plating torn open, exposing huge holes.

A fire broke out in the stern of the ship. But suddenly from the Sheer they saw a flash and heard the characteristic sound of a gun shot. This single gun of the steamer being shot opened fire on the pocket battleship.

Anyone who doubted could be convinced of this in a few seconds, when a column of water rose just some fifteen meters from the side of the Sheer, dousing everyone standing on the bridge with a salty shower. If the elevation angle of this gun would have been a little more, the projectile would have landed directly on the bridge of the Sheer.

But the commanders of the English ship had no more chances. A huge wall of flame rose almost forty meters into the sky, painting the Sheer blood red.

The shocked sailors of the Sheer, no longer very happy with their successes, watched the flames devour the ship with the entire crew. Finally, the ship sank, sinking astern, and the Sheer went on in search of new victims.

On the deck of the battleship near the turrets of the main caliber, ringing, rolling brass cases of powder charges of 280-millimeter guns rolled. Anyone who wished to enter or exit the towers had to jump over them like a circus acrobat.

The cabins and cockpits were completely destroyed by the firing of the main caliber guns - just like during the recent storm.

Soon, the Scheer's radar detected another ship in the southeast, and the pocket battleship, picking up speed, rushed after him. The target again turned out to be a heavily loaded bulk carrier, in which some boxes and containers were piled up even on the upper deck. Guns roared, and the ship began to sink rapidly. However, having plunged along the upper deck, he stopped sinking. Apparently, the timber folded on the upper deck kept him afloat. It became clear that this ship could not be sunk by artillery, and Kranke decided to finish it off with a torpedo.

The torpedo, gently jumping out of the apparatus, rushed to the target, and the Sheer, without waiting for the results of the shooting, went on. Many already believed that the torpedo had passed by when a huge column of water rose above the bow of the half-submerged ship, tossing it out of the water.

Boxes stacked on deck flew overboard. What was in them? Aircraft? Aircraft engines? It was hard to say, but no one doubted that the cargoes were military. The stern of the steamer rose higher and higher, finally, it disappeared completely under water, completing another tragedy at sea.

The ship sunk was the bulk carrier Beverford with a carrying capacity of 10,042 gross register tons. His radio station was constantly broadcasting detailed reports about the attack on the convoy, about the destruction of the Jervis Bay, about the burning tanker, and then about the sinking of one ship after another. Two hours later it was the turn of the Beverford itself, and when the Scheer opened fire on it, the ship's radio station broadcast a radiogram: Our turn has come. Farewell! Captain and crew of the Beverford.

By 19:30, the Sheer had used up a third of its ammunition. The attack on the convoy had been going on for three hours. Kranke decided to stop the action because no one knew what tomorrow might bring. The whole airwaves were filled with calls for help, and there was no doubt that the British would soon take the most energetic countermeasures against the Scheer. The disposition of the English warships was unknown, which meant that they could be quite close. In any case, the further consumption of ammunition could have a detrimental effect on the combat readiness of the Sheer. In principle, the task assigned to the "Scheer" was completed.

In addition to the sunken ships, he managed to break the most important line of sea communications of the British, since the enemy already knew that a powerful German ship was operating on this line, and it was unlikely that they would soon resume movement across the Atlantic along this line. Generating a sense of fear, anxiety and insecurity is even more important than inflicting specific material losses. Therefore, in the remaining hours of darkness, Kranke decided to get as far away from this place as possible.

The forecast of the forecaster officer began to come true again. The wind was blowing harder, and the state of the sea was approaching a storm. The barometer had been falling steadily for several hours now. The growing swell reduced the speed of the Sheer, and every hour the scattered ships of the convoy went further and further, making it very difficult to detect them. Especially since

The Sheer constantly showed its place in the darkness with gun flashes, giving the outgoing transports the opportunity to choose the direction of withdrawal.

Captain First Rank Kranke, taking into account all these factors, decided to follow the west for the time being, remaining on the search course, and then turn south. The British command could suggest several options for the further actions of the Admiral Scheer: returning to the base, appearing in the Bay of Biscay, continuing operations in the North Atlantic, or moving away from the British supply routes. But it is unlikely to guess about its location in the central Atlantic. The sailors of the Sheer, who had been in their places on combat alert since two o'clock in the afternoon, got the opportunity to warm up and have a bite to eat.

However, at 20:17, combat alarms sounded throughout the ship. Signalmen on the bridge found a new target - a modern motor ship with a displacement of about eight thousand tons, which had the misfortune to follow approximately the same course as the Sheer.

The ship rushed to the left too late, trying to get away or at least increase the distance. The Scheer's guns thundered again, scoring four direct hits at once. The ship burst into flames as if it had fallen under volcanic lava. It was clear that he could not escape, and "Sheer", without wasting time, went on.

Kranke radioed the results of his actions, roughly estimating that he had succeeded in destroying eighty-six thousand tons of Allied tonnage. Of course, only after the war was it possible to more or less accurately reconstruct the picture of the attack on convoy HX-84, when the British Admiralty disclosed previously secret data on their losses.

On 13 November, everyone aboard the Scheer was quite surprised when a British Admiralty communiqué announced the loss of the Jervis Bay and nine of the thirty-eight ships in the convoy. It turned out that some two ships, which Kranke included in his list of sunk, also did not reach British ports, since the Maupan, as you know, was going

not in a convoy.

However, the Chronology of the Second World War, published in 1947 by the Royal Institute of International Affairs, states that the convoy HX-84 lost only six ships. And the captain of the first rank Roskill in the first volume of his "War at Sea" speaks of only five ships.

Of course, it is always possible that the ship, which the attacking ship thought was sunk, could actually survive and eventually reach the port.

For example, the tanker "San Demetrio" because of the fire (and it burned like a torch) was abandoned by the crew, but the next day the crew landed on it again from lifeboats, started the cars, extinguished the remnants of the fire, and in the end, after a long and difficult Odyssey, brought a tanker to England.

The English Admiralty spared no effort to organize a search for the Sheer and destroy it. From Scapa Flow, the largest battlecruiser in the world, Hood, immediately left Scapa Flow in search of Sheer, accompanied by the battlecruiser Repulse and three heavy cruisers of the fifteenth squadron. Together with six destroyers, they created a guard curtain at Brest and Lorient, while the powerful battleships Nelson and Rodney patrolled the Denmark Strait and the Icelandic-Faroe barrier to intercept the Sheer if she decided to return to base. Later, the Admiralty ordered the Rodney to proceed to Halifax to directly cover the next convoy. Several heavy cruisers were sent to the attack area of the convoy. The Admiralty was sure that the Scheer, having achieved such success, would return to Germany, and took appropriate measures. But on the "Sheer" they did not even think about returning.

V

The Admiral Scheer was moving at full speed in the exact opposite direction than the British Admiralty believed. In the Azores region, a pocket battleship had a secret rendezvous with the supply ship Nordmark, from which Kranke hoped to receive ammunition, diesel fuel, water and provisions, and then get lost in the vastness of the Atlantic, waiting for the British to run out of excitement hunting for him. The rendezvous was at twenty-five degrees north latitude and forty-five degrees west longitude.

Along the way, the storm front predicted by the Defant touched the Sheer with its edge, forcing Kranke to reduce the speed of the ship. This was highly undesirable, but the consolation was that this storm would interfere with enemy search operations as well.

Two days later, the weather improved significantly, the sky cleared of clouds, it became noticeably warmer. An emergency call was announced on the ship to repair the numerous damage caused by the shock wave from the continuous firing of the main caliber guns. All the damage was minor and did not in any way lower the combat capability of the ship, but there were a lot of them. Some took place because of the inexperience of the personnel. For example, loose inkwells were left in all administrative premises. At the very first volleys, they jumped out of their nests and all the rooms were flooded with ink of different colors. The Arado hydroplane standing on the catapult was badly damaged. The volleys of the stern tower plucked out many feathers from the "ship's parrot". The fuselage was broken in several places, the rudders and ailerons were broken. However, Lieutenant Pitch, after inspecting the machine, declared that it could be repaired, and with the help of the ship's carpenter and two mechanics, he set to work.

On November 9, the sun shone brightly over the Sheer in the endless blue sky, turning the ocean into some kind of fabulous golden lake with its rays. The ship simply glided over the calm surface of the sea. November 10, Sunday, officers and sailors were ordered to assemble in the quarterdeck. Then the command was given to lower the flag, and everyone bared their heads in memory of their two comrades who died during the hurricane. The orchestra played the sad melody "Their hatte aine kamerad", the commander said a few words, after which the flag was raised to its place, and life on the ship flowed as usual.

According to the compass, the Sheer was now heading south, leaning toward the southwest. This course took him to Trinidad, Venezuela or Guiana. At noon, Kranke spoke on the ship's broadcast, reading out to the crew a congratulatory radiogram received from Grandmaster Raeder, Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy.

November in Europe is considered to be actually a winter month, but in these latitudes the sun burned so hot that many sailors, not knowing the insidiousness of the tropical sun, began to sunbathe or walk naked to the waist in their free time from shifts. Several people immediately burned and were sent to the infirmary. Sunbathing was forbidden, and sailors were ordered not to appear undressed on the upper deck. They were now uniformed in short-sleeved T-shirts, shorts, and canvas boots. The officers dressed in white tunics and trousers.

A flock of dolphins followed the ship, jumping out of the water. There were also flocks of seals. All this was a good distraction from the routine of ship life. The rendezvous with the Nordmark was scheduled for November 12, which, of course, none of the Scheer crew knew about.

After lunch, the signalmen saw the masts on the horizon, but instead of a combat alert, only the port watch was called to the places. The sailors were surprised to see how the Scheer, neglecting all precautions, was approaching some unknown vessel. And they got worried. What does the commander do? Does he know what's going on? Sailor Information Service immediately reported: the commander was sitting on the bridge in his chair and smoking his favorite Brazilian cigar.

- So, - the sailors immediately concluded, - this is our ship, German.

And they were right. But it was not Nordmark. Only the captain of the first rank Kranke knew that the German tanker Eurofeld was in front of him, whose captain also did not know anything about who he was waiting for. He was ordered to arrive at such and such a point in the ocean. Shortly before the start of the war, the tanker was in the port of the Dutch island of Aruba, where it received diesel fuel. The outbreak of war found him at sea, and the captain of the tanker was ordered to proceed to Tenerife in the Canary Islands, because due to an accident in the car, Eurofeld had no chance of reaching German ports. But the German naval command did not forget about him, deciding to use the tanker and its cargo to provide ocean raiders. In the Spanish port, the life of officers and sailors of the tanker was not so bad: the Spanish authorities gave them complete freedom, but everyone wanted to return home as soon as possible. The period of tedious waiting and doing nothing ended at the end of the summer, when the captain finally received a secret instruction to follow the indicated coordinates at sea. He was promised further instructions when the tanker was already on the high seas.

At the indicated coordinates, the Eurofeld met with the German auxiliary cruiser Vidder, which transferred a good part of the tanker's cargo to itself. But Vidder was not able to help the tanker with the repair of vehicles. His own vehicles were in need of repair, forcing the auxiliary cruiser to abort the raid and return to Germany. With great difficulty, hobbling at a speed of 4 knots, "Vidder" reached Brest, taken by this time by the German troops.

Returning to the Canary Islands, the captain of the tanker von Rukteschell again reported to the command about the condition of his vehicles, after which the commander of the Scheer Kranke was instructed to try to repair the vehicles of the tanker with his crew, which was supposed to be sent to the South Atlantic as a supply vessel for the auxiliary cruiser Thor.

After the exchange of identification signals, the captain of the first rank Kranke informed the captain of the Eurofeld that he was sending a boat with mechanics to him to inspect the condition of the tanker's machines and decide what could be done to repair them. On the same boat, Kranke invited von Rukteschel to come to him on board the Scheer.

The boat delivered a group of Scheer mechanics to the Eurofeld, led by engineer-captain of the second rank Ewe, took on board the captain of the tanker and went back to the Scheer.

On board the Eurofeld, Captain 2nd Rank Ewe and his men inspected the tanker's vehicles, which were in the most deplorable condition. Even before the war, the tanker was supposed to go to the dock for the overhaul of engines and boilers, but she was pushed into the sea, hoping that she would have time to return from Aruba before the war began. The boilers were leaking, the pipes were constantly pierced, the ventilation did not work. Two people have already been scalded. The full speed of the tanker was five knots, while everything in the car gnashed and rang. The captain of the second rank, Ewe, nevertheless decided to repair the tanker's car, hoping that the missing materials could be found on the Nordmark.

Nordmark arrived only on 14 November. In accordance with the instructions of the command, he delayed to supply the U-66 submarine with everything necessary.

commanded by Lieutenant Stockhausen, operating in the Atlantic.

When the Nordmark - a huge tanker with a displacement of 22,850 tons - stopped just three hundred meters from the stern of the Scheer, the crew of the pocket battleship greeted him joyfully. On the tanker they had many friends and acquaintances from their old service in Gotenhafen. A ship's orchestra played on the poop deck of the Sheera. The conductor and the musicians were slightly puzzled, looking in bewilderment at the huge ship, on the mast of which the American Stars and Stripes flew, and on the bow was the name "Prairies" - United States of America. The Nordmark was disguised as an American tanker. Since the United States was still neutral, such a small military stratagem was perfectly acceptable.

A boat rolled off the Nordmark, and its commander, Captain Second Rank Grau, arrived on board the Scheer. When parting in Gotenhafen, both commanders said goodbye: "Goodbye in the ocean." Now that the meeting was over, they silently shook hands. There was too much work to waste words.

Kranke's main task at the moment was to fill his battle magazines and fuel tanks. From the bow of the Nordmark to the stern of the Scheer, mooring lines and a pair of fuel hoses were transferred, through which the pumping of fuel began. Meanwhile, all the boats and boats available on the two ships began to scurry between them, transporting all kinds of supplies to the Sheer. In the event that something suspicious appeared on the horizon, it was possible to quickly give up the mooring lines and hoses and, in a short time, put the ship on alert.

The loading of supplies and ammunition continued throughout the night. Shell after shell descended from the Nordmark onto the waiting boats and were delivered to the Sheer, where they were hoisted aboard with winches.

The reloading continued until November 16 and, despite all the difficulties, there were no serious incidents. True, one 280-millimeter shell fell off the lines and fell back into the hold. Pale, frozen with horror, the sailors silently watched as he flew down and slammed loudly on the bottom of the hold. The catastrophe did not happen, since the projectile was without a fuse, but it caught up with fear on many. It was even worse when the same thing happened to a barrel of beer. It shattered into pieces, splashing its precious contents on the bottom of the hold.

The Nordmark had a military crew. But now all the sailors were dressed in American uniforms, with white American naval caps on their heads. But on the tanker, of course, there was no such strict discipline as on the Sheer, and the commander provided the sailors with some concessions. The main thing was constant bathing in a canvas pool built between the cargo hatches of the holds. The second entertainment of the sailors of the tanker was the equally constant hunting for sharks. Forty-eight shark tails were pulled up to the yard as proof of success. In their free time, the sailors sawed cockades from shark teeth for peakless caps and various badges.

Nobody interfered with loading operations. Only one night, south of them, a steamship flooded with lights, apparently an American one, passed. He passed, of course, without noticing anything.

VI

Until November 20, the Sheer remained at the forty-fifth degree west longitude. "Nordmark"

received an order to follow to the next rendezvous, and "Evrofeld" headed for the South Atlantic. Then, in the hope of encountering any enemy ships, the Scheer moved along the five hundred mile zone established by the Americans as their national security zone.

It was getting hotter. The temperature of the water reached sixty-three degrees (Fahrenheit), and in the steel rooms of the ship the heat was like in an oven. When descending from the upper deck into the interior of the ship, it was as hot as when entering a Turkish bath. The high humidity was even worse than the heat. The sailors were suffocating, drenched
Then.

Kranke was killing time by playing chess with the ship's quartermaster, hiding in the shadow of the stern turret of the main caliber.

The next two days passed without incident. The weather remained fine, cotton-wool clouds floated peacefully high in the sky.

On the third day, signalmen noticed smoke on the horizon, and the Sheer, trembling from a sharp change in the mode of operation of the machines, rushed in its direction. However, the alarm turned out to be false. Signalers mistook a dark cloud rising from the horizon for smoke.

Sunday, November 24, also turned out to be quite peaceful, which, in fact, Sunday should be. But as soon as the sailors sat down to dine, the combat alarms sounded. The people fled to their posts. The Scheer was approaching a rather strange steamer, which looked like a large rectangle, and the chimney was sticking out right from the deck in the stern. Large boxes and containers were stacked on the deck, and a long-barrelled gun protruded from the stern, slightly covered by some kind of bags.

The steamer was most likely English, because, as soon as he saw the Sheer, without a second of delay he broadcast: "R. R. R." a kind of SOS signal for British ships attacked by a German surface raider).

Following "R. R. R." the steamer transmitted its name "Port Hobart" (7500 gross register tons) and coordinates. On the bridge of the Sheer, according to the reference book, it was determined that the ship Port Hobart was a refrigerator. Judging by the course, he was heading for Europe.

The steamer continued to transmit the distress call and its position. Kranke decided, having dealt with him, to change course east, cross the Atlantic and appear off the African coast, where no one was waiting for him. Therefore, he allowed the English steamer to transmit calls for help, giving out the place of the Scheer, ordering her to stop with a flag signal. Without answering, the Port Hobart turned stern to the Sheer, trying to get away.

"If someone turns his ass, it means he wants to be whipped," one of the officers on the bridge of the Scheer quoted Goethe.

"Give him a warning shot on his course!" Kranke ordered.

The gun hit, and a column of water rose a hundred meters ahead of the steamer. The signalmen reported that the jet astern had disappeared, the ship was stopping. Kranke's face brightened. So, the captain of the Port Hobart was not alien to common sense. He radioed several times for help, indicated his name and place. What else could he do? Just do as he is told. He had already risked his life and the lives of his subordinates by using the radio. This is where the heroism ends. Anything else would be suicidal.

As the radio interception service on board the Sheer noted, all the radio calls of the steamer did not

were accepted by the British. No station acknowledged reception. But this was done unexpectedly by some American warship, which confirmed the receipt of distress signals from the Port of Hobart and relayed its radiograms to the British in Bermuda.

"This is how the Americans understand their neutrality," Kranke commented. "And they are trying with all their might to make us respect him.

The prize team sent from the Sheer was met on board the Port of Hobart by the senior mechanic.

"The captain is waiting for you in his cabin," he announced politely and with dignity, as if he were receiving ordinary Sunday guests.

"Go to him," Lieutenant Blaye advised Lieutenant Engels, who commanded the prize party. "Be as cold to him as possible, and we will search the ship."

Lieutenant Engels followed the starmech to the captain's cabin.

"He didn't even go on deck," Engels thought irritably, imitating the English engineer in his mind: "The captain is waiting for you in his cabin."

Along the way, they passed a gigantic, ferocious-faced sailor and a blond-haired teenager of about fifteen standing side by side. With their mouths half open, they looked at the German officer with curiosity.

"This is our boatswain and captain's bay," the mechanic explained.

The chief engineer opened the door and gestured for the lieutenant to enter. In a comfortably furnished cabin, the German lieutenant was received by Captain Hall of the Port of Hobart. The ship's papers presented by the captain were in excellent order. True, the secret instructions of the Admiralty were not among them, and Captain Hall was clearly not the kind of person who was ready to hand them over to the enemy of his country. Therefore, Lieutenant Engels did not touch these instructions with a word, hoping that the prize crew would find them, if these papers were still on the ship.

- How many people are on board? - Minting every word, Lieutenant Engels asked the captain.

"Sixty-eight," replied the captain. "Eight of them are passengers; seven women and one man, English. What will happen to the lady?"

"If they behave like a lady, they will be treated like a lady," the lieutenant remarked dryly.

"I have no doubt about it," the captain agreed. "But if they are transferred to your ship, they will be in very great danger. After all, this is a warship, and there is a war going on. You will not be able to leave with impunity every time, as happened on November 5th.

"Perhaps," Engels nodded his head. "But aren't women on your ship exposed to the same danger from the vicissitudes of war?"

It was evident from the expression on the captain's face that this thought had never occurred to him.

Meanwhile, the lieutenant carefully looked through the ship's documents, from which he learned that the Port Hobart left Liverpool on November 3 and was accompanied by an escort to the twenty-fifth degree west longitude. After that, the ship went alone to Curacao,

bunkered there, and then it was supposed to go through the Panama Canal to New Zealand.

Did you recognize us right away? asked Lieutenant Engels.

"No, unfortunately," the captain admitted. "At first I mistook you for an American. But when I saw the superstructure and the three-gun turrets, I realized who you really are.

- And immediately reported it on the radio? the lieutenant asked with a wicked grin.

- Certainly. Even before you gave me the signal to stop," the captain replied.

Did you give any details about us in the radiogram? the lieutenant continued to inquire.

"Unfortunately not," the captain sighed.

"Don't be sorry," the lieutenant remarked. "But thank fate that we limited ourselves to a signal and a warning shot.

The captain said nothing and with a leisurely movement unbuttoned the collar of his tunic. According to the documents, the armament of the Port of Hobart consisted of one 102-millimeter gun, two Hotchkiss machine guns, four smoke canisters and two depth charges. The commander of the gun was a Chief Petty Officer from the New Zealand Navy Reserve.

Lieutenant Engels examined the ship's gun. The gun was covered with sandbags. At the ready in an open box lay shells as antediluvian as the gun itself.

By order of Engels, the crew and passengers began to go into lifeboats. Women, mostly elderly, were returning home from England to New Zealand on this ship. Despite the fact that all their plans collapsed, the women remained completely calm. Internment awaited them with almost no chance of exchange. But they did not betray their feelings in any way and smiled gratefully at the German sailors who helped them get into the boats and transfer their suitcases there.

One young woman who was among them even seemed cheerful. Later, when the identity of the captured passengers was established, the crew of the Sheer learned with great surprise that a very famous English actress was on board their ship. She spoke fluent German and charmed all the sailors with her "Danke zer".

In her cabin, they found a small promotional brochure for the play Faust and the book itself, dotted with notes in English. On page 95, the young lady underlined in red ink the expression: "Having humbled your pride, you cannot but bow before the terrible power that will meet you." It was very much in line with what happened to her.

Meanwhile, the sailors of the prize crew, armed with pistols, continued to inspect the ship, passing along the corridors, where the unlocked cabin doors now opened and closed, depending on the ship's pitching. In the cabins, traces of the hasty departure of the crew and passengers were everywhere visible. Various things were scattered on the floor and on sofas, empty drawers of tables and cabinets lay on the deck, letters and postcards with English stamps and postage stamps, photographs of relatives and friends, some of them in frames. Again, the merciless fist of war fell upon dozens of families, turning their lives upside down like a shovel tearing apart an anthill.

At this time, Lieutenant Blaye, together with Captain Hall, opened a wine battalion filled with bottles of whiskey of various grades. The captain offered to move everything

it was on the boats, and the lieutenant, in principle, did not mind when shouts amplified by the mouthpiece were heard: "Leave the ship! Everyone get into the boats at once!"

Surprised by such a hurry and not knowing what had happened, Lieutenant Blaye ran up to the upper deck.

- Quickly get down into the boat, - Lieutenant Engels ordered, - move two hundred meters from the side and wait for further orders.

Blaye learned that the non-commissioned officer, who was supposed to place demolition charges in various places on the ship, did this on his own initiative, without waiting for an order. And when the order was received to do this, the non-commissioned officer misunderstood him and decided that this was an order to blow up the ship. And immediately set fire to fickford cords. Having done this, he saw with horror that Lieutenant Engels and his people were not at all going to leave the ship, continuing to inspect it without haste.

Why don't you leave, lieutenant? the non-commissioned officer asked in a frightened voice and reported that the fuses were already on fire.

- What? Lieutenant Engels couldn't believe his ears. - Who gave you permission? .. Who ordered it? ..

But then the officer realized that if the cords were on fire, then one should not waste time on an official investigation of the actions of the demolition officer on the ship, ready to take off into the air, but should quickly evacuate everyone to the boats. Even more unpredictable, the situation was made by about half a dozen sharks, which circled around the ship, anticipating a hearty meal. Lieutenant Engels saw their dorsal fins perfectly from the bridge, where he stayed with three volunteers, believing that the bridge was the safest place in such an environment.

The first explosion was heard when Lieutenant Engels treated his sailors with cigarettes. The shock wave slammed the cigarette case shut, having previously thrown out all the contents from it.

Four more explosions followed in succession, throwing debris and flames into the sky. None of those on the bridge were injured, and Lieutenant Engels signaled to the nearest boat to come up to the side of the ship and receive them. The Port Hobart began to list slowly.

"Hurry up," Engels ordered his men. But anything can happen.

Having handed over the ship's documents and magazines to the boat, Engels and his sailors themselves jumped into it, and the boat began to move away from the dying steamer. When they moved about a hundred meters away, two more charges exploded, but the Port Hobart stubbornly did not want to sink. "Sheer" with direct fire began to finish off the slowly sinking ship from 105-mm anti-aircraft guns. The Port Hobart caught fire, and the wind carried black wisps of smoke over the sea. At the stern of the Sheer, with their ears plugged, stood the crew and passengers of the steamer, watching her agony.

The women did not show any nervousness as the shells flew over their heads and tore the Port Hobart to pieces. The ship finally began to sink. At first, his nose slowly, as if reluctantly, began to sink into the water.

Having already disappeared from the surface of the sea, the bow of the ship rose several times above the swell, and water fell from it in waterfalls. Under the pressure of the waves, the abandoned ship began to sway, and the deck cargo was washed overboard. These were the boxes where parts of the aircraft for the New Zealand Air Force were located. The bow of the ship each time plunged deeper and deeper, and the stern rose higher and higher. The water rushing across the deck extinguished the fires and

steam began to escape from the bowels of the ship, along with black smoke, for some time completely closing the Port of Hobart. Only the tops of its masts remained visible, plunging into the depths of the ocean. At last the Port Hobart, shrouded in clouds of smoke and steam, disappeared from the surface of the sea. Only some boards, planks, a pair of airplane wings and some rags swayed on the ocean swell. This is all that remains of a ship of 7,448 gross register tons that carried a cargo of phosphates, paper, paint, machine oil, rail, linoleum and salt.

Signal R. R. R. ", which Port Hobart managed to broadcast, alarmed the British command, although it was not clear from the radiogram whether it was an auxiliary cruiser or a pocket battleship. Nevertheless, on the Sheer they realized that it was time to leave these waters and go to the Cape Verde Islands, where the trade routes leading to England from South Africa and South America converged.

The need to strengthen the protection of their shipping was understood in London. Along with the ships already in the North and South Atlantic, a new "Connection K" was formed, which included the newest aircraft carrier "Formidable" and the heavy cruisers "Berwick" and "Norfolk". This unit was supposed to operate off the west coast of Africa, based in Freetown.

The Hermes aircraft carrier and one of the D-class cruisers were based on Saint Helena, and the South American squadron was reinforced by the heavy cruiser Cumberland and the light cruiser Newcastle. At the same time, all ships proceeding from the South Atlantic were instructed to lay their course west of the Cape Verde Islands, since the command believed that it would be easier to protect them there from robbery by German surface raiders. But it was precisely in this area that Kranke led the Admiral Scheer in the hope of new luck.

VII

"Scheer" was on a new course - exactly to the east. For several days, the pocket battleship kept to the edge of the Sargasso Sea, which once so disappointed Columbus, who mistook it for land, but in the end made sure that there was water, only water and nothing but water.

Kranke led the ship on a constant course - strictly to the East, intending to stir up the entire dovecote of the British Admiralty with an unexpected appearance on the shipping routes south of the Canary Islands, where the routes of English merchant ships, following from South American ports and around the Cape of Good Hope, converged on their long way to the metropolis from India and Australia.

By Sunday, the Scheer had moved into position between the western Canary Islands and the Cape Verde Islands. Soon the signalmen reported the detection of smoke on the horizon along bearing two hundred and forty-eight. The officer of the watch approached the deck binocular.

"I don't see anything," he reported, carefully examining the horizon.

He wiped the lenses and looked again.

"No," the officer repeated. "I don't see anything." You must be mistaken," he said to the signalman.

And he invited the sailor to take another look through the binoculars. He looked.

Indeed, Lieutenant. I don't see anything right now either. But when I looked earlier," the signalman confidently reported, "there was definitely something there.

"Good," the lieutenant agreed. "Go and report to the commander about this.

The sailor approached the commander and reported that he saw smoke on the horizon, which through disappeared for a moment.

After listening to the report, the captain of the first rank Kranke, looking at the map, asked the opinion of the navigator. The smoke that disappeared could have belonged to the ship, but it could also have belonged to a warship.

"There is no indication that there are British warships anywhere in the vicinity," said Captain Budde, an intelligence representative, "but, on the other hand, we have received information that a large and well-guarded convoy is currently heading south. There is even an aircraft carrier in his cover.

Budde looked at the map and said that, by all indications, this convoy should now be somewhere south of the Canary Islands.

"So we need to be careful," Kranke concluded. "We'll now follow the direction the signalman indicated, get close enough to see the tops of the masts, and then we'll look.

And the commander ordered to increase the speed to twenty-four knots.

Raising a huge breaker up its bow and trembling with its whole hull, the Sheer rushed off in the indicated direction, and after twenty minutes the signalmen reported that the tops of the masts of some vessel appeared directly on the course.

The commander himself climbed to the upper platform of the superstructure and for a long time examined the masts in telescope.

"It's not a warship," he said at last. "It's a merchant ship.

Having ordered to lie down on a course parallel to the course of an unknown vessel, Kranke went down to the bridge, and, entering the navigational cabin, said to the young signalman:

- Well done! There really is a ship going there!

In the chart room, the discussion continued. The tops of the masts, sticking out like two needles above the horizon, said little.

Does this vessel belong to the enemy or to any of the neutral countries? Maybe it's an auxiliary cruiser or a passenger liner?

"I don't know where the convoy is," said Kranke. Let's wait until dark.

Everyone was especially concerned about the question: if it turns out to be a passenger liner, then what to do with its passengers?

So, it was decided to keep until dark on a parallel course with an unknown vessel, which, without making any suspicious movements, also continued to follow the same course. It should be borne in mind that the ship could also be a German auxiliary cruiser. But there were very few German auxiliary cruisers, and the Atlantic was so large that a chance meeting with them was practically

excluded. Radio operators listened to the air, but no negotiations of warships in the area were recorded.

When it began to get dark, Kranke ordered to turn a little on a course converging with an unknown vessel. The commander of the Scheer expected to overtake the stranger and appear from his bow courser, so that if he turned out to be an Englishman, he could not use his gun, which, as a rule, was installed at the stern. The unknown vessel was traveling at a speed of about twelve knots, and the Scheer had to increase its speed noticeably to overtake it. When it was completely dark, there was a fear that the pursued vessel would change course and disappear into the night. The radar was turned on, reporting on the movement of this ship everything that needed to be known.

Kranke sat in his command chair on the bridge, puffing on his invariable Brazilian cigar, calm and peaceful.

Such a complacent appearance of the commander prompted a cameraman seconded from the Ministry of Propaganda to dare to ask him a question:

"When will we attack, sir captain of the first rank?"

"Let's wait until they have dinner and sit down to play poker," Kranke answered amiably.

At that moment, clouds covered the moon, and pitch darkness hung over the sea.

"And how can your signalmen follow the enemy in such darkness?" the cameraman continued to ask questions stubbornly.

"We have compiled a special vitamin diet for them with lots of carrots," the navigator replied without batting an eyelid. "Thanks to her, they see in the dark like cats.

The radar station was considered top secret, and no one on board, except for the operators, was aware of its existence. Many saw the antenna on the superstructure, but no one dared to ask what it was.

At 20:50, the Sheer changed its course somewhat, starting a gradual approach to the target.

- Bearing thirteen, - reported from the radar. - Distance six thousand meters ...

Distance is five thousand five hundred meters.

A sheaf of sparks flew out of the Scheer's chimney. This could not be avoided with increasing speed, which each time irritated everyone on the bridge, who feared that the ship would be seen ahead of time. Meanwhile, from the signal post on the fore-Mars, they reported that they were visually observing the silhouette of a large ship. Kranke ordered to open the searchlight.

A sheaf of light snatched out of the darkness a large ship just some three thousand meters from the Sheer. In response, the ship lit identification lights, resembling in the ghostly light of the searchlights of the mystical Flying Dutchman.

- There is a gun at the stern of the ship! signalmen reported to the bridge.

We saw it on the bridge ourselves. One issue has been resolved. At least it's not "neutral". The 105-mm Sheer gun fired a warning shot under the nose of the intercepted vessel. As soon as the Scheer opened the searchlight, the British began to turn away. From the Sheer they flashed a signal light: "Stop! Don't use the radio!"

At that moment, everyone on the deck of the Sheer saw people running towards the stern of the British ship. Apparently, these were the commanders. Then everyone noticed how the barrel of the gun began to rise and turn towards their ship.

- Turn on the second spotlight! Kranke ordered calmly.

A beam of light rested on the stern of the British ship, illuminating the gunners, frantically fussing around the guns. Apparently, they believed that they were dealing with a German auxiliary cruiser and were ready to fight. The English captain, apparently, did not imagine that he met with a ship capable of destroying him with one salvo. Kranke decided to leave the English captain in his delusion and ordered to open fire with an auxiliary caliber, since the ship did not obey his orders and did not respond to a warning shot. At the same time, the Sheer commander took a risk: a stray English shell could hit the Sheer. The senior artilleryman gave the command, and the guns began to speak.

Almost simultaneously, a tongue of yellow flame burst from the barrel of the English gun, and a shell whistled over the Sheer.

— Good God! They are shooting! - exclaimed the forecaster Defant, who was on deck, and considered it good to go down from harm's way. There he met another officer, on the contrary, who wanted to go to the upper deck.

Is the storm coming? asked the officer of the Defant, hearing the thunder of the guns. - Has it started to rain? Apparently he wanted to freshen up.

Now the 105-mm anti-aircraft guns opened fire. Soon direct hits on the British ship began. Nevertheless, the British stern gun continued to send shell after shell towards the Sheer. However, without qualified fire control, all British shells flew past. The ship was already on fire in several places, but the British stubbornly continued to hope, as in the case of the Jervis Bay, for David's luck in the battle with Goliath. But Goliath won again.

Only after the 150mm Scheer guns had fired thirteen shells and the 105mm guns had fired ten, did the British captain decide he had had enough and obeyed the order to halt. Apparently, at the same time, he gave the order to his commandors to cease fire - it was clear that they moved away from the gun.

Kranke asked the radio room to see if the British had reported the attack over the radio. If that were the case, he would have had to keep firing until the radio station on that ship was destroyed. From the very beginning of their use, ship radios have always been considered one of the most unreliable and capricious devices ever installed on warships. As a rule, at the most critical moment, either the lamp burned out, or - even worse - a stray projectile or even a small fragment destroyed the entire well-established system of internal and external communications. Kranke had long known that the British had moved the radio stations on almost all of their ships from the main superstructure to a less dangerous place that no one knew for sure.

Fortunately, they reported from the radio room that the ship was not using the radio station, and Kranke ordered a ceasefire. He was not so bloodthirsty as to take pleasure in killing brave sailors, although he had every right to do so under international law - the ship responded with fire to his order to stop.

Now it was possible to establish the name of the vessel. It was the cargo ship Tribesman. It stood motionless, swaying evenly on the ocean swell and raising steam. The siren, which was turned on, gradually subsided as the steam pressure decreased. There were four shell holes in the stern of the ship, like blots on the cover of a book. Kranke ordered to turn off

searchlights, which at night could be visible at a great distance; it should not be forgotten that British submarines could be in these waters.

Senior officer Gruber stood on the quarterdeck with the sailors, ready to take on board the crew of the Tribesman and passengers, if any, on board. Storm ladders were lowered overboard, and orderlies with stretchers were on duty on deck to immediately send the wounded to the infirmary.

After the searchlights were closed, the eyes of the sailors got used to the darkness for a while, and then the captain of the second rank Gruber began to honk his hand lantern to give a guide to the lifeboats of the British ship.

- The boat is on the water! shouted one of the sailors, pointing to the left of the ship.

— No, — looked at the senior officer. — This is not a boat. Apparently, one of the ship's lights is reflected in the water.

But this was not the case, for the lights were clearly moving, bouncing on the waves.

— People overboard! the boatswain suddenly shouted.

Now everyone saw that the light source was British life jackets, the bulbs on which were lit automatically from interaction with water. Then the sailors of the Sheer heard that people in the water were not shouting in English, but something like the word "Alla!" When they were eventually dragged out onto the deck of the Sheer, they at first took them for blacks and were surprised at their small stature, but, looking closer, they realized that they were Indians.

Wrapped up in blankets, the Indians sat on the deck. They shivered so much from the cold that they could not hold the cigarettes offered to them in their fingers. Interrupting each other, the rescued told the sailors of the Scheer that their boat had capsized as soon as it touched the water, that there were many people overboard, and that the Tribesman was carrying the crew of another ship of the East Asia Company, sunk by a German submarine, which the Tribesman was supposed to deliver to Singapore.

Meanwhile, English sailors began to gather on the deck of the Sheer. Some got to it by swimming - from an overturned boat. They did not have time to write down and sort. The British were placed with the crew of the Hobart, having taken them to the wardroom of non-commissioned officers for meals.

"Thank you for keeping us busy," the captain of the Hobart said to Lieutenant Petersen, who was in charge of the prisoners. "I won't forget that when you yourself are fished out of the water and taken prisoner.

"I don't think that will ever happen," the lieutenant replied cheerfully.

- And I'm sure, - the captain did not give up, - that the time will come when you will rejoice at any witness who would confirm the fact of your human treatment of prisoners of war. You still remember these words!

Lieutenant Petersen didn't answer.

It turned out that among those who arrived at the Sheer there was no captain of the Tribesman, a chief engineer, a radio station chief, and several other officers and sailors. It turned out that they left on a motor boat, having lowered it from the side opposite from the Sheer. When this became known, they were probably already several miles away from the battleship. Lieutenant Petersen immediately reported this to the commander.

"It's a shame," Kranke agreed. "But there's nothing to be done." We can't comb this area with searchlights hoping to find them. Let's hope they don't make it to shore, although they have a good chance of doing so.

Immediately after the Scheer ceased fire, the prize party was sent to the Tribesman. Along the way, they saw many people floating on the water and crowded boats, where there were mainly Hindus.

"Sail to our ship," Lieutenant Engels, who led the prize team, shouted to them, "you will be taken on board!"

Approaching the Tribesman, Lieutenant Engels bypassed the drifting and swelling ship on a boat. The Tribesman seemed completely abandoned. No one responded to Lieutenant Engels' demand to come aboard. The lieutenant climbed onto the deck along a storm ladder hanging from the stern. Not a soul was there, but care had to be taken. The British could prepare a lot of surprises - for example, they left well-camouflaged subversive charges on the deck and inside the ship.

Following the lieutenant, senior non-commissioned officer Krueger climbed onto the deck. No sooner had he set foot on deck than he heard a shot. Krueger drew his pistol, but it turned out that it was the lieutenant who fired at some shadow that frightened him against the background of an iron door clanging on the roll. Then the rest of the sailors of the prize team went up on deck. Krueger and the sailor-radio operator were ordered to find the place where the ship's radio room is located, and to find out thoroughly whether the Tribesman had reported the attack on him.

In peacetime, the radio room was usually located somewhere near the command bridge. But with the outbreak of war, the British began to leave only the receiver next to the wheelhouse, and the transmitter was hidden in a safer place. The command bridge and pilothouse of the Tribesman looked like a small fortress, covered with logs and sandbags to protect it from splinters. At the stern, in addition to a long-barreled gun, a machine gun was also found, mounted on a superstructure to fend off aircraft. The machine gun turned out to have a solid supply of equipped belts.

At that moment, a light came on on the ship. Lieutenant engineer Klaazen and his mechanics, having gone down, found a switchboard and started one of the dynamos.

But even in the light, senior non-commissioned officer Krueger at first could not find the radio room. Then he saw a ladder leading from one deck to another, also covered with timber and sandbags. Under the ladder was a narrow hole. The non-commissioned officer squeezed into it and found what he was looking for. Both the receiver and the transmitter were in a small room. On the deck stood an empty wooden box, painted with yellow stripes. Apparently, secret documents were stored in this box. Perhaps the British radio operator managed to destroy them or took them with him, fleeing with the captain and other officers on the boat.

A hasty search by Krueger turned up little of interest. We managed to find only some forms with the stamps of the British Admiralty. Krueger took them just in case. A tropical jacket hung on a chair. Apparently, the radio operator, leaving the ship in a hurry, decided to dress warmer. Krueger searched his jacket pockets, where he found a piece of paper folded in half. Reading it, Krueger clenched his teeth. It said: "SOS! We are under fire from a German raider..." This was the last message broadcast by a British radio operator.

The Tribesman was a modern ship built in 1938 and well equipped. The captain who hid on the boat knew his business - the ship was clean, there was no peeling paint or rust anywhere, as on most merchant ships.

Having placed explosive charges, the prize crew gathered at the stern of the ship, reporting the situation to Lieutenant Engels. He counted his people and ordered them to quickly descend into the boat. When they were halfway to the Scheer, the first explosion rumbled behind them. Explosive charges were located in the ventilation shafts and engine room. They began to explode one after another, punching large holes in the ship's hull. The Tribesman began to sink rapidly into the water, and twenty-seven minutes later, when the prize crew had already returned aboard the Sheer, the waves closed over this vessel.

From the Tribesman's ship's papers, it became known that the ship left Liverpool for Calcutta on November 20 with general cargo and two thousand bags of mail. Until November 24, the ship sailed as part of a convoy, and then went on its own, intending to go around the Cape of Good Hope. The second navigator from the Tribesman was on board the Sheer, and Lieutenant Petersen asked him what they wanted to achieve by opening fire on the Admiral Scheer? Have they all gone crazy?

"We were blinded by searchlights," the navigator admitted, "and at first we mistook you for a surfaced submarine. We soon realized that this was not a submarine, and we thought that we were dealing with an auxiliary cruiser. When we realized who we were dealing with, the captain immediately ordered a ceasefire and abandon the ship.

Did your radio operator broadcast a message about this? Petersen asked.

"He was obliged to do this without waiting for any orders," the captive navigator explained. "And I am absolutely sure that he did just that.

VIII

Having sunk the Tribesman, the Scheer sailed a southwesterly course for twenty-four hours, then turned to the northwest, and twelve hours later to the northeast. Then Kranke set a course to the east, and later returned to the northwest course. It was not easy for captain first rank Kranke to make decisions in a complex naval chess game, where one pawn - his ship - was opposed by powerful enemy forces. In this game, the Sheer commander had no right to make a mistake, because the very first wrong move could be fatal, and the game would be over. The game was further complicated by the fact that Kranke knew practically nothing about the disposition of the British naval formations that threatened him with destruction. The Hobart had spoken openly about it before its death, and now it was becoming clear that the Tribesman had managed to broadcast at least a short warning.

One could only hope that this message was not accepted by anyone. In addition, we should not forget about the captain of the Tribesman, who fled on a boat. He could be picked up by passing ships, but even if this did not happen, he may well reach the Canary Islands, which are not so far away. The captain will pinpoint the exact location of the attack on the Tribesman and reveal who did it.

Reasoning about what the enemy might expect from him further, Captain First Rank Kranke came to the conclusion that the British Admiralty assumes his further movement to the south and southeast along the lines of the actions of "Admiral Count Spee", who was in approximately a similar situation. As a result, Kranke decided to go north, so that the enemy would get the impression that he was returning to Germany and intended to intercept and send a couple more transports from the HX convoys to the bottom on the way back.

For the next few days, the Scheer sailed north across the desert ocean. Having reached the intended point on this course, Kranke turned the ship to the south. The usual ship service was going on on board, and those free from watch found a new entertainment for themselves: to observe the habits of captive Indians. Coming out on deck, they sat cross-legged in an oriental way in the shade of the stern tower and sat there without moving, resembling stone statues of the Buddha. They were all short, terribly thin - skin and bones - downtrodden and intimidated. Looking at them, it was hard to imagine that their country had created a mighty civilization even when Britain and Germany were in a primitive state.

The Hindus refused to eat any other food except rice, which they cooked themselves so that each grain lagged behind one another. The cameraman, forgetting about other things, constantly followed the Indians, wasting kilometers of film on them.

Meanwhile, the ship's aviators were trying to revive their beloved "parrot". Lieutenant Pitch himself put on overalls and worked along with the mechanics. They did their best, and Pitch went to Crank to report that the Ara-do was ready to fly. Captain First Rank Kranke personally inspected the results of their work and shook his head doubtfully:

"You know, Pitch, how important this plane is to us. But, to be honest, I will never allow you to even try to take off on what is left of him.

"I'm ready to take full responsibility, Herr Captain First Class," Pitch promised.

"I wonder," Kranke asked curiously, "who will be responsible after you crash into the sea and I can't get you out?"

"But the plane is in perfect order," Pitch continued to insist. "As a pilot, I answer that no emergency will occur, apart from various trifles. In the end, we simply have to test the machine: is it serviceable or not? Moreover, it can be done right now. You can't imagine better weather!

Kranke reluctantly agreed. He turned the ship into the wind and stopped the machines. All the boats were lowered, which lined up in a chain along the proposed route of Pitch at intervals of one hundred meters, in order to quickly fish Pitch himself and his observer out of the water if necessary.

All the freemen poured out onto the upper deck to gawk at this perilous show.

Lieutenant Pitch signaled from the cockpit, and the catapult officer waved his flag in an unconcealed manner. To everyone's surprise (as it later turned out, and Pitch himself), the Arado took to the air superbly. But then he began to swing from side to side like a drunk, fall on his nose and fall, losing height. Near the surface, Pitch managed to level the car, and the Arado flopped into the water like a sack of coal that had fallen overboard. At least he stayed afloat and did not receive serious damage, and a subsequent check showed that the ailerons did not work on the aircraft and the entire control system jammed.

The defects found were corrected, and a couple of days later Lieutenant Pitch tried to take off again from the Scheer with the same precautions. Remembering the last attempt, everyone was worried and worried even more. All went well this time, except that the makeshift repairs had reduced the plane's speed by about twenty miles an hour. But he was fit for service again!

From time to time, the Scheer changed course, combing the area of the Atlantic that Kranke had chosen for hunting. But everything was empty. No haze, no masts appeared on the horizon.

Perhaps the British Admiralty, having received a warning, changed the routes of the convoys. It's good that we managed to put the Arado into operation. Pitch flew reconnaissance several times, but returned each time without finding anything.

Returning from yet another longest flight, Pitch reported that eighty miles from the Sheer he had found a large vessel resembling the Tribesman heading southeast. The pilot noticed that the ship's superstructures were painted white.

After analyzing all the data, Kranke came to the conclusion that it was an American, and decided not to get involved. Colliding with neutrals was very dangerous. It was impossible to sink them, and they immediately notified the whole world about the appearance of a raider.

In the evening of the same day, an interesting natural phenomenon was observed from the Sheer, when two tropical thunderstorm fronts converged on the horizon. It seemed that the end of the world had come, when terrible lightning struck the surface of the ocean, and from a terrifying thunder, ears were blocked, as from volleys of the main caliber.

The next day, the Scheer changed course, again heading to rendezvous with the Nordmark to replenish fuel and provisions.

Having finished loading, both ships parted, setting their next rendezvous for December 27 in the South Atlantic.

"Scheer" continued its movement to the south and in a few days was supposed to cross the equator. In peacetime, this event was always celebrated with a theatrical ceremony with the appearance on board of the god Neptune, monkfish and the baptism of those who cross the equator for the first time. Those who were about to cross the Zero Parallel for the first time, having heard the tales of the old people, trembled with fear and hoped that the ceremony would be canceled due to wartime. But Kranke decided not to deviate from tradition and hold the ceremony in a somewhat simplified form, so that it would not really interfere with the service.

More than a thousand young sailors, therefore, had to appear before the angry eyes of Neptune and explain the reason for the invasion of his possessions. December 10 "Scheer" crossed the Tropic of Cancer, and therefore invaded the possessions of Neptune. At 17:00, the formidable god spoke on the ship's broadcast, threatening the crew with terrible punishments for violating the borders of his kingdom. Five days later, a day before the crossing of the Neptune (equator) line, Admiral Triton appeared on board the Sheer, surrounded by devils and cannibals, striking terror into the hearts of neophytes. Triton was supposed to come to the board on a boat, but the ceremony was simplified, and he appeared from the hatch, nevertheless, he was greeted, as expected, by bugles and boatswain pipes. After that, the commander gave Triton a report. The captain of the first rank Kranke, in full dress uniform with orders, met the envoy of Neptune on the quarter quarters and, taking it under his visor, reported:

"The heavy cruiser Admiral Scheer, with a crew of 1,340 men, of which 140 were not baptized, respectfully asks His Majesty the Sea King for permission to pass through his domain.

- With great pleasure we allow you this, dear Kranke, replied Admiral Triton. - In our underwater kingdom, we heard a lot of good things about you and your sailors.

Admiral Triton shone with gold ornaments and awards and had a long gray beard, like Admiral Tirpitz. Under all this, it was difficult to recognize the non-commissioned officer Dima, who played this role.

The main ceremony took place the next day. On deck, the ship's band played popular tunes, drowned out by the cries of the victims and the laughter of the spectators. To great horror

of all those gathered among the neophytes was the senior officer of the Sheer, captain of the second rank Gruber. Everyone feared that Gruber, using his high official position, would find a way to get out of the mandatory baptism, and therefore bathed him in the pool longer than others.

Neptune was portrayed by Lieutenant Petersen, and his wife, the Sea Queen, was a young rosy-cheeked sailor dressed in a woman's dress, artificially creating all the necessary bulges. The Neptune astronomer stepped forward and looked into his huge Sextant.

- Zero degrees! he announced loudly.

At that moment, the Sheer crossed the equator, about which all those on duty and the participants in the ceremony were notified by the included siren.

By evening the show was over. One thousand and forty people were baptized. Before dark, people put themselves and the ship in order.

The next day, another event was celebrated on the Sheer, although less noisily. The rev counter showed that the ship's propeller shafts had completed seventy-five millionth cycles of work, which, in terms of distance, meant that the Scheer had already circled around four times.

Sveta.

On this occasion, the commander's visit was expected in the engine room.

When the number 74,999,999 appeared on the counter, the commander of the electromechanical warhead, Captain Second Rank Ewe, stopped the vehicles.

At that moment, Kranke went down to the engine room, where he was met not by Ewe, but by the non-commissioned officer on duty. The non-commissioned officer addressed the commander with a brief speech, from which Kranke understood little, but, going up to the tachometer, he saw the numbers jump out on it - 75,000,000.

This happened at 16:00, December 17, 1940.

IX

The Admiral Scheer, continuing south, now entered the trade routes between Brazil and Europe and between Brazil and Africa.

In this area, British ships were of particular interest, supplying the British naval bases in Gibraltar and Freetown.

On December 17, Kranke turned the ship to the northeast. On this course, the Scheer soon crossed the equator again, but this did not bother anyone - there was not a single soul left on the ship that had not been "baptized" by Neptune. The thoughts of the crew now occupied more serious things. Repaired and tested "Arado" twice a day - in the morning and in the afternoon - took off for reconnaissance. On December 18, while returning from another reconnaissance flight, Lieutenant Pitch shook the wings of his seaplane. This meant that the Arado pilots had discovered some kind of vessel. Climbing up to the bridge, Pitch reported that he had found a cargo ship of about eight thousand tons with a gun in the stern, lined with sandbags. The ship was heading northeast on a course almost parallel to that of the Sheer. At 11:36, the masts of a British ship appeared on the horizon. A little later, a chimney and dark yellow superstructures appeared. And finally, the body became visible,

deep in the water. The ship was under full load.

The ship's signalers also spotted the Sheer, and the cargo ship's radio station immediately began transmitting a message that a warship was approaching them. "R. R. R." rang out over the air, and although the Scheer's radio operators tried to jam the transmission, they failed to do so—some British station confirmed the receipt of a distress call.

- Fire a warning shot! Kranke ordered.

Whistling through the air, the projectile raised a fountain of water in front of the bow of the steamer. However, instead of stopping, the ship turned aside and increased speed in an attempt to get away. It was reported from the radio room that the British ship was continuing to send out distress calls. Freetown confirmed one of the radiograms and asked the ship how many pipes the attacking ship had: one or two.

"Second warning shot!" Kranke ordered.

A 150-millimeter shell exploded at the very bow of the ship, raising a column of water that hit the deck.

"The enemy is slowing down," the signalers reported, and the Sheer's gun fell silent.

Apparently, the captain of the ship had the good sense to stop resistance and avoid senseless bloodshed.

The Scheer was slowly approaching. The steamer let off steam and stopped. Kranke was completely careful. The too high deck superstructures of the steamer caused bewilderment, and some kind of trap could not be ruled out. The steamer could have been a heavily armed auxiliary cruiser disguised as an ordinary merchant ship.

Lieutenants Engels and Blaye with the prize crew hurriedly headed towards the English ship.

"They're throwing something overboard!" Lieutenant Blaye suddenly shouted. "Probably secret documents. Ask Scheer, what should we do first: try to find the discarded or go up on deck?"

They signaled from the Sheer: "Come on board. Another boat will look for it."

A storm ladder was dropped from the ship, but for some reason it turned out to be too short to be reached from the boat. Lieutenant Engels shouted this to the British, but for some time there was no answer. The lieutenant had to shout loudly several more times before someone's head hung over the gunwale. Having finally understood what was the matter, the Englishman lowered the ladder a little lower with a smile. But Engels had to make a powerful jump when the wave lifted the boat up to cling to the storm ladder. The whole crew followed him, climbed on deck and immediately began to inspect the ship.

The English crew, among which there were many blacks, wearing life jackets, lined up on the upper deck. All were carefully searched and checked on the ship's list. There was not a trace of worry on the faces of the British. Apparently, they did not expect any danger to themselves from captivity. But a separate group of passengers was clearly showing anxiety and hostility. It turned out that these were the French, who were heading to London to join the ranks of General de Gaulle's Free French. The ship's name was "Duquiesa". It was a refrigerator with a displacement of nine thousand tons with a cargo of meat and

fruits, as well as nine hundred tons of eggs.

"Nine hundred tons of eggs!" - surprised one of the German sailors. - Why so many eggs?

- Mind your own business! the lieutenant cut him off. "And don't ask stupid questions!"

Dinner was already ready in the ship's galley. Lieutenant Engels studied the menu. It was like being in a first class hotel. Despite the war, there were no shortages in the supply of sailors with allowances. At least on board the Duquiesse.

In the captain's cabin, tidy and tidy, a large colored poster hung over the desk, entitled

MILITARY GOALS OF THE NAZIS

The text on the poster stated that the map depicted on it was based on secret Wehrmacht documents from 1937.

The map showed the countries that should be captured in the first place: Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia. These countries have already been invaded. Then, the map prophesied, the Balkan countries would be invaded, followed in 1941 by Belgium, Holland, France, Great Britain and Portugal. And finally, it was Russia's turn. "The policy of the Nazis is continuous aggression with the aim of seizing foreign territories," summed up the graphic propaganda poster.

This poster unspeakably surprised the German sailors.

"Russia? But we have concluded a friendship pact with Russia!.. This is nonsense... Hitler is not such a fool to repeat the mistakes of the Kaiser and fight on two fronts... This is just indefatigable propaganda and nothing more."

At this time, the captain of the steamer entered the cabin to collect his personal belongings. Lieutenant Blaye pointed him to the poster and asked what the hell was on it.

"Of course you find it hard to believe now," smiled the Englishman. "But if you live long enough, you will see that it is all true. You will see for yourself."

Meanwhile, the Scheer and the captured steamer were exchanging signals. On the battleship, they wanted to know if the prize crew would be able to fly the Duquiesse and go back to Europe on it.

This question could only be answered by Lieutenant Engineer Klaasen, a former senior mechanic of the merchant fleet, who inspected the engine and boiler rooms of the captured steamer.

The ship was quite old, built in 1918, with coal-fired boilers and a nominal speed of fourteen knots, although it was doubtful that she had ever given such a speed. After checking the condition of the boilers and coal bunkers, Klaasen shook his head.

"Tell Scheer that this is impossible. First of all, there will not be enough coal for the return trip. Where do we get coal?"

The Nordmark has everything except coal. And their consumption is eighty-five tons per day. With their supplies, they can only get to Freetown or the Strait of Gibraltar.

But Kranke had already finally decided to make "Duquiez" a prize. Lieutenant Engels was recalled to the Sheer, and the command of the ship was taken by the captain of the merchant fleet Goych, who was part of the prize team of the pocket battleship.

The British captain of the Duquiesa, his chief mate, the head of the radio station, and two commandors of the stern guns were sent to the Sheer, while the rest of the crew and passengers, who were declared prisoners, remained on the ship. With the crew reduced to a minimum and Negro stokers from the old Duquiez team, raising the German flag over the English gun, she received an order to follow the rendezvous of the German ships operating in the Atlantic. This place was known to the raiders under the name "Andalusia".

Before the ship left, Kranke ordered the eggs to be reloaded from it onto the Sheer in order to replenish food supplies. While the eggs were being reloaded, the Scheer radio operators were constantly picking up encrypted radio communications from British warships. The British cipher could not be broken, but the number of radio messages made it clear that the British fleet was carefully combing the Atlantic in search of the Sheer.

"Be on your guard, Goych," Kranke admonished the new captain of the Duquiesa before sailing. "Do not forget for a minute, captain, that you have a lot of English on board, and what they are capable of, only the Lord knows!"

X

Hardly at 07:30 the sun broke away from the horizon, when the Arado seaplane was ejected from the Sheer, sending Lieutenant Pitch on another reconnaissance flight in search of enemy ships. The Duquiesa was still visible on the horizon, heading south and transferring nine hundred tons of chicken eggs to the Scheer.

The mathematicians on board the Scheer calculated that nine hundred tons was fifteen million eggs. This means that during the raid, the Sheer team will certainly not feel the need for eggs!

At 10:00, a radiogram from Pitch unexpectedly arrived. This in itself was surprising: Pitch had strict instructions to use the radio only in case of emergency. The radiogram said: "I found thirty enemy ships. I keep in touch." After reading the radiogram, Kranke shook his head doubtfully - this was some kind of mistake.

The return of the reconnaissance aircraft was expected by 11:00 - it simply would not have enough fuel for more. But by 11:00 the plane had not returned. Everyone on the bridge of the Scheer was uneasy. Kranke called his senior officer, Captain Second Rank Gruber, to the bridge.

"Gruber," the commander ordered, "open the safe in Pitch's cabin." I want to know if he made a mistake in taking the wrong cipher with him. I can't get his last message out of my head - thirty enemy ships! Where could they come from in this part of the world? Even if it's an English force looking for us, it can't be thirty ships. This is an obvious absurdity. Yes, and the radiogram itself is composed quite differently from

supposed to.

"Maybe Pitch found a convoy escorted by warships?" —

suggested the senior officer.

- Nonsense, - the commander disagreed. - In this part of the world? It can't be!

An inspection of Pitch's cabin showed that he had taken with him a cipher that he always worked with, since that cipher was the only one missing.

Then a new message came from Pitch: "I'm being followed."

This text is completely confusing. Is there an English aircraft carrier somewhere nearby? Otherwise, who could follow him?

But then why didn't Pitch report it in the first radiogram? Something is not right here! Then another message came: "I'm going to make an emergency landing, I'm asking for a bearing."

And again silence.

Kranke called the communications officer and intelligence officer Budde to the bridge, ordering them to carefully study the radio messages received from Pitch and try to find in them any contradictions that could explain the whole mystery of what was happening. The radio interception service did not find any signs of the presence of a large number of enemy ships or aircraft somewhere nearby.

Pitch's radiograms said he was having some sort of problem with the engine, which needed to be repaired. Everyone agreed that there was some kind of mistake in these radiograms, but no one could say what exactly. About what they reported to the bridge. Kranke decided to go to the place where Pitch was supposed to land, but to do so after dark so as not to be discovered by the mysterious enemy formation of thirty ships. If both pilots are still alive, then he will try to save them.

While the "Sheer" was going to the indicated place, a weak signal was received in the radio room at 16:00: "SOS OTN. RICK". The second set of letters was Pitch's callsign, and the third was the coordinates of the square where he was.

By pneumatic mail, the message was immediately forwarded to the bridge, and the Scheer changed course in the right direction.

- What the heck? What is he doing there? Cranke was surprised, looking at the map. "How did he get into this square?"

An hour later, radio operators received another SOS signal. This time the signal was stronger, which made it possible to take a bearing on it. Everyone off watch went out on the upper deck and tried to find Pitch's little Arado seaplane in the endless succession of waves.

At 18:00, the third SOS signal was received. The bearing showed that the target was directly on course. It was already gloomy, and, as usually happens in the tropics, the twilight was suddenly replaced by complete darkness.

In the darkness, right on the nose, signalmen noticed a rocket fired into the sky. They took a bearing on it and managed to measure a distance of about twenty-one miles. Everyone on the Sheer breathed a sigh of relief.

The ship was heading towards this place at full speed.

As soon as the Sheer arrived at the supposed place of the missile launch, they flashed their call sign from it with a signal light, and immediately, just two thousand meters away, lit up

navigation lights "Arado".

We adjusted the crane, approached the aircraft at low speed, and soon Lieutenant Pitch was already standing on the bridge in front of the commander.

"Damned glad to see you again, Pitch," Kranke greeted the pilot. "Where is your armada of thirty ships?"

Pitch looked blankly at the commander.

"I didn't report any ships, Commander. I just got lost on the way back and ran out of gas. I didn't see any ships.

"I suspected it," the commander nodded with relief. "Go and refresh yourself and get warm." Then we'll figure it out.

But the radio operators who attacked him, demanding an explanation, did not give Pitch a quiet dinner. Pitch stared at them with wide eyes, uncomprehending. He radioed only "SOS" and nothing else, using the Air Intelligence code table. Glancing at the table, the commander of the radio-technical warhead understood everything and ran to the bridge to report to the captain of the first rank Kranke about the reasons for this mysterious story. It turned out that the spreadsheet that Pitch was using was outdated. She was withdrawn from circulation on November 25, and the coast station, to which Pitch was formally assigned, was obliged to supply the pilot with a new table. Since Pitch had never used a radio before, no one noticed that he didn't have a new spreadsheet. A group of letters that, according to the old table, was read as a signal

"SOS" from an aircraft in distress, according to the new table, meant the detection of the enemy. Kranke poured out all the irritation accumulated for the day on the head of the distant head of the coastal radio service, who did not bother to supply Pitch with a full set of ciphers, apparently hoping that the Scheer would return to the base before November 25th.

This whole thing could have ended much worse. Say, Pitch reported the discovery of enemy warships, and on the Scheer his radiogram was deciphered as an SOS signal transmitted from the Arado. The Scheer would have gone to look for Pitch in the indicated place and suddenly ran into the British warships. In this case, not only the plane with two pilots, but the entire ship with a crew of one thousand three hundred and forty people could die because of a piece of paper that the coastal authorities forgot to supply Lieutenant Pitch.

All this was mainly due to the fact that Pietsch, as a pilot, was completely subordinate to the command of the Luftwaffe, because in today's Germany "everything that flew" belonged to Goering. The Navy did not have its own aviation.

XI

In addition to all the daily worries, the Scheer diesels, which had been running non-stop for nearly two months, were in need of repair. They continued to work without alarm, but the senior mechanical engineer knew that Captain First Class Kranke's plans included linking up with Captain Second Class Krüder's auxiliary cruiser Penguin and a joint attack on the Norwegian whaling fleets operating in Antarctica. In Antarctic waters, almost everything depends on the smooth operation of machines.

But the repair of diesel engines not in the dock, but in the open sea at a temperature of +40 degrees is not a task.

from the lungs. At the same time, the ship could not for a minute lose its ability to develop the fullest speed. Not the best times have come for mechanics and minders. "Sheer" continued to follow south, entering the zone of trade winds. From the south, white clouds crept across the bright blue sky, disappearing beyond the horizon. The sea was deserted, not a single ship met on the way, not a single radio signal sounded in the silent ether.

Somehow, acoustics set up a false alarm, catching underwater signals that could come from a whale, or could come from a submarine. To everyone's relief, it turned out to be a flock of young killer whales circling around the ship in the hope that someone would fall overboard.

By Kranke's orders, all the officers who could read English, French, Spanish, and Dutch went through the mailbags captured from the Duquiez. Kranke hoped to learn something new from private letters about the location of the English warships, but nothing could be found out.

For some reason, the ship somehow did not notice that Christmas was approaching. The whole environment - the tropical heat, the endless ocean - and the whole military situation, in which it was impossible to "love your neighbor as yourself" and "connect hearts in the world", did not in any way remind of the most expensive family holiday. Nevertheless, at the stern of the Sheer, in front of the main caliber guns, they installed an artificial Christmas tree and began to prepare for the celebration of universal love. Throughout the ship they made artificial Christmas trees and decorations for them. Moreover, some Christmas trees were made in such a way that it was difficult to distinguish them from real forest ones. They just didn't smell.

The day before Christmas was warm and sunny. The Sheer was a few miles from the Tropic of Capricorn, below the equator. At noon, the ship stopped casting a shadow - the sun was in a mathematical perpendicular above it ...

There was little joy from the holiday. Everyone on board thought about the relatives left behind in distant Germany and were sad. Many on the ship hoped that the war would be over before they returned from the raid, looking forward to a quiet, peaceful life. But while the war continued and, despite the pre-Christmas troubles, the Scheer guns were in constant readiness for action, and combat service was carried out on the ship according to the laws of wartime.

In the evening, those free from the watch gathered at the stern. Kran-ke descended from the bridge and stood among his subordinates. The bugles did not sing, the boatswain's pipes did not whistle, commands were not given, orders were not read. The ship's orchestra played the sad melody of "Holy Night", familiar to everyone since childhood.

Although no one could have dreamed of gifts from home, the team was served a celebratory dinner that included biscuits, Argentinean condensed milk, chocolate and more, obtained from the Duquiese, nicknamed the floating delicacy. There was also egg soup, fried potatoes with stew and even two bottles of beer per person! The nostalgia for home quickly passed, and the sailors returned to a good mood. In the cabins they sang songs and played the accordion. "Sheer" was moving slowly at the limit of controllability.

The next day, from the very morning, an order was given to the signalmen to strengthen their surveillance of the sea. Shortly after breakfast, the signalmen found the tops of the masts on the horizon. A few minutes later, a ship appeared within sight - an ordinary bulk carrier, but with a large number of people in white uniforms on the deck. From the bridge of the ship, some message "flashed" to the Sheer. According to the ship's broadcast, the crew of the Scheer was told that the ship that appeared was the German auxiliary cruiser Thor. Then came the order to the crew to line up on the upper deck from the starboard side, "Thor" came closer and closer, leaving on a course parallel to the "Sheer". His carriage was also built on top

deck.

"Greetings, Auxiliary Cruiser Thor. Welcome!" - signaled from the Sheer:

"Thank you! - Thor signaled in response. - We welcome you, dear Admiral Scheer!

The sailors shouted "Hurrah!" and waved their peakless caps.

When the excitement subsided somewhat, many noticed that the Thor was sailing under the Yugoslav flag and that the same flag was painted on the sides of the ship. And on the bow and stern is the name "Vir". This is how Thor disguised itself after the battle with the English auxiliary cruiser Carnarvon Castle. Signal lights on both ships continued to transmit messages.

"From K (captain of the first rank Koehler, commander of the Thor) to K (captain of the first rank Kranke, commander of the Admiral Scheer) - I cordially welcome you to Andalusia!"

"From K to K," replied Kranke. "Mutually. Would you like to have breakfast with me? How many eggs do you want and how do you prepare them?"

"Thank you for the invitation," the commander of the Thor signaled. "Please cook me a scrambled egg of three eggs."

"Out of three or out of thirty? - asked from the "Sheer". - Do not be shy. We have several million."

"Wonderful! replied Koehler. "I'm going to you immediately!"

Movie cameras chirped, amateur cameras clicked, fixing the meeting of two commanders on the high seas deep behind enemy lines. The captain of the first rank, Koehler, was greeted aboard the Sheer with the overflow of the boatswain's pipes.

Koehler and Kranke were old friends. After exchanging a strong handshake and hugging, the commanders spent about an hour in Kranke's cabin, decorated with a Christmas tree. They had a lot to talk about.

On July 30, Thor entered the battle off the coast of Brazil with the English auxiliary cruiser Elcantara - much larger and faster than herself. The displacement of the Elcantara was 22,209 tons. But the Thor's guns covered the target from the first salvo, and the British took aim for a very long time, achieving only two direct hits on the Thor. One shell exploded in the hold without causing significant damage, and the second hit the living quarters, pierced several bulkheads, but did not explode. In its turn. The Thor hit the Elcantara several times, with one shell exploding in the engine room of the British auxiliary cruiser, causing a loss of speed and a strong roll.

Koehler could have finished off the Elcantara, but that would have taken a lot of time and a lot of ammunition. In addition, the airwaves literally exploded from the stream of English radio messages, and Koehler had the impression that there were many British warships nearby, rushing to the aid of the Elcantara. So he decided to break off the fight and move away. One could also be content with the fact that Elcantara would have to undergo many months of repairs.

And more recently, the Thor entered into its famous battle with the English auxiliary cruiser Carnarvon Castle. Kranke had heard about this fight and was hungry for details. Koehler said that Thor was searching for enemy ships off the northern coast of Brazil. Above

The sea was hazy and visibility was very poor. Soon the radio operators received a message from the Brazilian vessel that it had been stopped by a British auxiliary cruiser. The report said that twenty-two Germans were captured by the British on board the Brazilian ship, apparently from the crew of the deceased "Count Spee". The instructions forbade Koehler to contact the British auxiliary cruisers, and, no matter how sorry he was for his captured compatriots, Koehler decided to get out of this zone.

The night from December 4 to 5 turned out to be hazy, and in the morning a thick fog descended, through the veil of which Thor walked blindly. Kohler spent the night in his traveling cabin behind the pilothouse.

During the day, the fog began to slowly rise over various parts of the sea. With an inexplicable instinct of an old sailor, Koehler felt that some danger lay in wait for his ship - the words constantly sounded in his head: "I'll eat my hat if this is not an auxiliary cruiser."

And indeed, soon the signalmen found some kind of ship in the gap in the fog. Barely looking at him, Koehler commanded:

- Anxiety! Auxiliary enemy cruiser!

Dressing on the move, the sailors scattered to their combat posts.

The enemy ship was about five thousand meters away, walking like a ghost through wisps of fog. It had at least twenty thousand tons of displacement, that is, it was five times the size of the Thor (3900 tons) and, accordingly, faster.

Koehler ordered a course change. The enemy did not react to this in any way. It seemed that his signalmen did not notice the small steamer, which looked like an innocent merchant ship. "Thor" went further and further to the left. At this point, the fog thickened again, and the British auxiliary cruiser found herself heading straight into the wake of the Toru. This time, they asked him for identification from Thor. No doubt the British regarded the small vessel as perfectly harmless.

Thor did not respond to the request, did not respond to other signals, continuing to go on its course. So half an hour passed. During this time, even the gentlemen of the Royal Navy lost patience, and the "Englishman" raised the signal: "Immediately stop!"

And in order to make it clearer to Thor what was required of him, a warning shot followed, and the shell raised a column of water about four hundred meters behind the stern of the German auxiliary cruiser.

- Right aboard! Koehler commanded and, turning around, fired a volley of all guns at the Englishman.

But on the English auxiliary cruiser everyone was already on the alert, and the return volley of the British sounded when the echo of thunder from the German guns had not yet ceased. The very first volley of the enemy fell in unpleasant proximity to the side of the Thor, but it was the best that the British managed to do.

Skillfully manoeuvring, the Thor scored several direct hits on the enemy's large ship, setting fire to its stern. Above the auxiliary cruiser of the British (on the "Thor" they already knew that this was the "Carnarvon Castle") a huge column of smoke rose, the guns fell silent, and the enemy ship began to put up a smoke screen. But "Thor" maneuvered in such a way that the smoke screen was behind the stern of the English ship and became useless. But the very fact of setting up a smokescreen by the enemy indicated that he wanted to break off the battle and retreat. Therefore, "Thor" developed a frantic rate of fire, to which

only far from new weapons were capable of it. Thor's gunners noted eight direct hits, and the artillery officer believed that there were at least twenty of them.

The enemy resumed fire, but did not achieve a single hit, although some of his shells exploded near the Thor, and fragments flew onto the deck. Judging by the fragments, the enemy had six-inch guns. The battle lasted about half an hour, the English auxiliary cruiser was on fire in several places, its combat effectiveness dropped noticeably. Then, fortunately for the British, he found the fog again, and the Carnarvon Castle disappeared into it. Thor never saw him again.

The crew of the Thor remained in their positions on alert, as the radio operators heard the Caernarvon Castle reporting its position and description of the German ship. The heavily damaged English ship returned to Montevideo, and with it twenty-two sailors from the Graf Spee returned to port, from where they sailed on a Brazilian ship.

On board the Thor were captured English sailors from the British ships sunk earlier by the Thor. When the battle began, they decided that they were all finished, as they were sure that the Carnarvon Castle would sink the Thor with the first salvo. When the fight was over, they refused to believe in its result. The Thor later obtained newspapers that said that the Carnarvon Castle had taken twenty-two hits and that the war would have to go on for a very long time so that the English auxiliary cruiser could complete her upcoming repairs.

XII

Having met, "Admiral Scheer" and "Thor" proceeded together to the secret rendezvous point of the German ocean fleet in the South Atlantic, code-named "Andalusia". When they arrived, they found the Duquesa and the Evrofeld tanker there, whose machine, repaired by the mechanics of the Scheer and Nordmark, worked without any complaints.

At exactly the appointed time, Nordmark also arrived in Andalusia.

The meeting of the German ships in the South Atlantic - deep behind enemy lines - was almost fantastic, considering what forces the British had been deployed to search for and destroy them.

During the day, various ships moored to each other, organizing friendly meetings of officers and sailors. Airborne aircraft constantly conducted aerial reconnaissance to avoid any unpleasant surprises.

Kranke continued to confer with Koehler. Both commanders tried to establish operational cooperation. To begin with, it was decided to capture a coal miner on the line Cape of Good Hope - Buenos Aires in order to extract a supply of coal for the Duquesa. Both agreed that this valuable ship with no less valuable cargo should be brought to some German port. But in this they were not lucky. Not a single coal miner was ever found.

The last day of the year was amazing. There was not a cloud in the cobalt blue sky. The ocean, known for its terrible storms, lay as still and flat as a pond. Even the swell stopped. Old, experienced captains of the merchant fleet, who have sailed around the world many times, looked at this miracle of nature with undisguised amazement. Even they had never seen such a calm ocean.

By noon, under the vertical rays of the sun, the assembled ships began to resemble models displayed on a piece of blue canvas. The sunless masses of ships contrasted sharply with the radiant blue sea. On the Sheer, everything was blazing with heat, it was no longer possible to walk barefoot on the deck, and senior officer Gruber caught two sailors trying to cook scrambled eggs right on the turret armor.

In the evening, the crew of the Sheer was lined up on the upper deck. Kranke addressed his subordinates with a short speech in which he listed all their achievements in the last two months of the outgoing year, thanked everyone for their service and emphasized that he expected the same behavior from them in the future. Then the commander of the ship read out to the crew the congratulations on the New Year received from Berlin from the Commander-in-Chief of the German Fleet. Then the orchestra played the well-known melody of the Revival of the Fleet.

It was getting dark. The fireball now hung low on the horizon, and the sky began to take on purple-gold hues, and the sea began to look like a bowl of molten gold.

As the sun went down, the command followed: "To prayer! Take off your hats!" The crew sang a Lutheran prayer. They prayed for relatives and friends, prayed for their country, for returning to their homeland and, of course, for victory. The purple sky stood above the ship like the dome of a magical cathedral. After a humble pause, the crew shouted "Hurrah!" three times, greeting the New Year and responding to the commander's congratulations. It was a soft, dark, moonless night.

At midnight, flasks struck on the ship: eight blows in honor of the outgoing year, eight blows in honor of the new one, 1941. In the morning, as a New Year's surprise, a ship's band from the Sheer was sent to the Thor to entertain the crew of the auxiliary cruiser.

On the Scheer, Captain First Rank Kranke received a message from the Naval Headquarters in Berlin about the tanker Storstad, which was sent on December 5 from the southern Indian Ocean to Andalusia by the auxiliary cruiser Penguin.

"Expect the arrival of the prize tanker Storstad in Andalusia in the first days of January - approximately on the 2nd or 3rd," the radiogram said. "Storstad will transfer fuel to the Nordmark, take copies of combat logs and letters from the crew from you. The latest data suggests that the "Penguin" moved to the Atlantic. "Sophia Caesar" (code designation "Scheera") should be ready for joint operations with the "Penguin" against the Norwegian whaling fleet.

At the time of receiving this radio message, neither Kranke nor the headquarters in Berlin knew that the lone wolf Ernst-Felix Krüder, who commanded the Penguin, had his own plan to capture the entire Norwegian whaling fleet without firing a shot, using the element of surprise. This plan was developed by Krüder and his officers based on intercepted radio communications between the Norwegian whaling base "Ole Wegger" and whalers scattered throughout Antarctica. Moreover, Krüder decided to carry out this operation on his own, without the help of his "big brother" - "Admiral Scheer".

"Storstadt" was late. On January 4, the tanker had not yet appeared, and Kranke began to worry: was the ship captured by the British?

The Sheer climbed north on fifteen degrees west longitude, hoping to meet the tanker. At dawn the next day, signalmen noticed smoke over the horizon. It was the Storstadt.

A young officer boarded the Scheer and reported to Kranke on the bridge:

"The prize tanker Storstadt has arrived at your disposal, Mr. Captain of the first

rank. Lieutenant Hanefeld reported.

"I'm glad to hear it, dear Hanefeld," Kranke greeted the young man. - How was the hike? Have there been any emergencies?

"Nothing out of the ordinary happened," the lieutenant replied. - Only on the "roaring forties" we got a little bit. The ship was bursting at the seams. That's why we were late. Actually, there is nothing to report. All prisoners are on board and behave calmly.

"All right," said Kranke. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, Mr. Captain of the First Rank," the young officer was embarrassed. "We really need food. I would especially like real potatoes. We sat on dried vegetables for almost a month.

"It's easy to do, Hanefeld," Kranke smiled. "You'll get potatoes and much more." How do you feel about eggs and meat? Say, if I give you fifty thousand eggs and several tons of meat?

Lieutenant Hanefeld thought they were joking with him and smiled incredulously, the way people smile when they are being played. Of course, it is foolish to ask for potatoes in the South Atlantic from the commander of the ship, who has not been in port for two months.

Kranke understood what the young man was thinking.

"I mean it quite seriously," Kranke confirmed his words. "Look, there is a ship with yellow superstructures. This is Duquiez. She's full of groceries. There you can get whatever you want. By Mr Churchill. Still have problems?

"No way, mister captain of the first rank!"

Kranke only now noticed how thin the lieutenant was. Dark circles under the eyes, bloodless, sunken cheeks, a tunic dangling on a thin body.

"You look very tired, Hanefeld," Kranke remarked. "Just exhausted."

"A little tired," the lieutenant agreed. "I didn't leave the bridge for almost a month. But everything is in order, Mr. Captain of the first rank.

"I will send an officer and a work party to replace you while the fuel is being transferred," Kranke ordered. "And you stay with us, eat properly, sleep well." You will still need strength on the long journey home.

"Thank you very much, captain of the first rank," Hanefeld muttered in complete confusion.

He obviously did not expect such participation from the commander of the heavy cruiser, who seemed to him a cold and indifferent pedant, who thought least of all about his subordinates.

"Then that's all," Kranke summed up. "You can go, Hanefeld.

The commander of the Scheer warmly shook hands with the lieutenant and ordered the messenger to take Hanefeld to the wardroom, where the young officer could finally eat real potatoes.

In the afternoon, when boats were being lowered from the Scheer to go to the Duquiez for food, the combat alarms suddenly sounded, and people scattered around

to their places. The tops of someone's masts were found on the horizon.

The German ships began to disperse in different directions. The Nordmark was towing the Duquesius, which ran out of coal. The cutter from the Scheer, which had no time to be taken aboard, was dragged in tow behind the Duquiez, like a dog on a leash.

"Sheer", instantly brought to combat readiness, picking up speed, went towards the appeared masts. The watchful eyes of the signalers glared at the horizon. In the trembling haze of a tropical day, the silhouette of a suddenly appeared ship resembled a small aircraft carrier. The ships were now moving in converging courses.

"That can't be," the senior gunnery captain of the second rank Shuman reacted, hearing the suggestion that this was an aircraft carrier. "There is always security ahead of the aircraft carrier.

"Perhaps the guard had to leave for some important task, and he was left alone," they objected to him.

"Let's see," Schumann shrugged his shoulders, raising the binoculars. "Let's hope that's the case.

However, the discussion soon ended, as it turned out that it was Thor, who had left the day before, returning to Andalusia.

"Look," Kranke commented, "how hot air distorts the image. I also mistook it for an aircraft carrier.

- Alarm down! - came the command.

Interrupted work resumed. Lieutenant Engels with a working party arrived on the tanker "Storshtad" to replace Lieutenant Hanefeld and his sailors. They brought several thousand eggs, fresh vegetables and sacks of potatoes onto the ship. Other supplies necessary for the voyage were obtained from the bottomless holds of the Nordmark. In turn, the Nordmark was pumped over with fuel that the captured tanker was carrying to Borneo. Scheer and Nordmark specialists examined it and found it excellent, ready for use without any further purification.

The day passed in continuous hard work. Lieutenant Hanefeld, rested and refreshed, reappeared on the deck of his tanker. Another group of prisoners was transferred to the Storstadt, and at the request of Hanefeld, Kranke reinforced the prize crew of the captured tanker.

The tanker now carried about six hundred prisoners, half of whom were British. These were seasoned and brave sailors and it was by no means an easy task to supervise them, for there was no guarantee that the British sailors would resign themselves to their present position. The prisoners were kept, to put it mildly, not in very good conditions. The officers were placed in the bow quarters, and the sailors in the bow hold. The electric lighting was turned off here and there, the ventilation was blocked so that it would not occur to the prisoners to give any light signals. During the day, the tropical sun heated the rooms so much that the temperature there was like in an oven.

"I am sorry to keep you in such conditions," Hanefeld explained to the English sailors.

"However, in part such conditions reflect my respect for your valor and readiness for anything. You see, I do not at all want to end my career in some of your ports as a prisoner of war or go to the bottom from a torpedo by our German submarine if she sees your flag. Therefore, it seems to me that all the precautions I have taken are simply necessary.

On the way back, Hanefeld often opened hatch covers at night to ventilate the hold with prisoners, and sometimes even allowed them to walk in small groups on the upper deck.

As for the captains of the ships sunk by the Penguin, they lived in cabins located on the port side of the superstructure, where it was easy to observe them by the German sentries. Among them was a Salvation Army general captured on one of the ships.

"These are real men," Hanefeld explained to his subordinates. "They are locked up without tobacco and whiskey, without complaining. Under other circumstances, I would have liked to spend an evening or two with them on the Riepenbach in Hamburg to gain experience.

In addition to the harsh men, there were seven women on the ship who also needed to be looked after. Most were elderly, but one, the daughter of an English general, was only twenty-seven years old and very pretty, especially from the point of view of men who had been at sea for several months.

And finally, the Norwegian crew of the Storstad, who lived in the stern of the ship, was on the ship. The word was taken from the Norwegians that they would not cause any harm to the ship and the German prize crew. Some of them even volunteered to stand regular watch, which Hanefeld was very happy about, as this freed up his people to perform security functions. Under the supervision of Hanefeld, Norwegian navigators and helmsmen steered the ship, and mechanics, under the supervision of two German non-commissioned officers, kept watch in the car. The cooperation between the Germans and the Norwegians was polite and reliable, so Hanefeld gave them his word that upon arrival in Germany he would make every effort to ensure that the Norwegian team was released and had the opportunity to return to their homeland. Indeed, upon returning to Germany, Hanefeld kept his word, although doing so proved much more difficult than he expected.

When the Storstad was captured by the Penguin, a mine cellar was equipped on it, which is now used to contain non-European prisoners. The whole of Asia was represented in the cellar: Chinese, Malays, Burmese, Indonesians and Indians of all shades and varieties. Black Africa was represented by blacks from the English and French colonies.

All of them were taken to Germany, and their further fate is unknown.

XIII

By January 7, 1941, the Admiral Scheer had already been at sea for seventy-seven days. If, when leaving Gotenhafen, only the commander of the ship knew about the goals and objectives of the raid, now everyone on board knew about them. Patience is the main virtue of the raider commander and his crew. For days on end, you can not see anything around, except for clouds running across the sky and waves running across the ocean. But at the same time, you can't relax even for a second.

But, knowing everything, the crew of the Scheer still knew nothing. The ship cut the ocean waves, but no one guessed that Kranke decided to enter the shipping lanes in the Gulf of Guinea. This operational zone, unfortunately, was in unpleasant proximity to the British naval base on St. Helena, and therefore, to reduce the risk, it was necessary to enter there under the cover of darkness. But, on the other hand, operating in the dark, it was quite possible to confuse a merchant ship with an enemy warship, with all the ensuing consequences. In other words, the chess game went on,

requiring careful consideration of each of his moves and the probable move of the enemy. The radio intelligence service reported to Kranke that the British aircraft carrier Hermes was stationed on St. Helena, and possibly several other heavy warships. Kranke decided to lose some time and camouflage the Admiral Scheer in such a way that it was impossible to recognize it, and even more so, to accurately identify it, hoping that the British warships and merchant ships would take the Scheer for their own. On January 14, the sailors painted the sides and superstructures of the Scheer according to all the laws of impressionism, radically changing its appearance.

In the evening, the Scheer machines started up again, and the ship turned east from the northeast course, heading for the Gulf of Guinea. On January 17, the raider entered the main shipping route leading from Cape Town.

The time had come again for Lieutenant Pitch, who flew out in his Arado twice a day to reconnoiter, but found nothing. Maybe the British changed the route of their ships? Or perhaps their ships are hiding in the bays of the African coast, preferring to lose time but save lives? And then, on January 18 - exactly a month later, as the Scheer captured its last prize - the Duquiez, the Arado suffered another accident and failed again.

"But if we are really a happy ship," suggested the navigator, "then we should be lucky in a few minutes," he looked at his watch. It was 10:15. It was at this time a month ago that the signalmen found the Duquies. No one even had time to laugh at this joke, when the cry of a signalman was heard, who found a column of smoke on the horizon at a bearing of three hundred and fifty degrees. The officers looked at the navigator-prophet with almost mystical horror. The ship, increasing speed, went in the direction of the smoke. Soon the approaching ship was identified. It was a tanker. But it was not known whether he was English or neutral.

Fortunately, Lieutenant Pitch and his mechanics once again revived the ship's parrot, and the Arado flew out on reconnaissance in order to take a closer look at the tanker. Returning, Pitch reported that the British tanker, with a displacement of about ten thousand tons, was fully loaded. The Scheer was still out of sight from the tanker. Kranke decided to let the crew have a quiet dinner, and then, after waiting for darkness, attack the tanker, as was the case with the Tribesman.

At 19:00, Kranke ordered a combat alert to be played. As usual, all combat units quickly reported their readiness. The prize crew in life jackets, with pistols and grenades on their belts, awaited orders from the bridge.

The night was dark, as they say, even if you gouge out your eye. Turning starboard to the tanker, the Scheer entered a course parallel to it. Approaching the victim at a distance of several hundred meters, the Scheer opened the searchlights, brightly illuminating the tanker, which was sitting deep in the water. The order to stop was immediately duplicated by a warning shot under the nose of the tanker from a 105-millimeter gun.

From the bridge of the Scheer, they saw that something very reminiscent of panic was happening on board the tanker. People ran back and forth along the longitudinal bridge, went down and up the ladders. Some stood numb and covered their eyes from the blinding light of searchlights with their hands, trying to see from under their hands a ship of a completely incomprehensible type that had attacked them.

The order to stop the tanker complied immediately. His radio was silent. Kranke ordered the prize crew to board the tanker. Having lowered their motor boat, the team of Lieutenant Engels headed for their next victim. Along the way, they met a lifeboat from a tanker filled with people.

- What is this ship? Lieutenant Engels asked them, but no one answered.

- I'm asking you, what is the name of your ship? the lieutenant shouted again. "Are you all deaf?" What is the name of your ship and how many people are on it?

Again no one answered.

- Who you are? What is the ship's name? - for the third time, with notes of irritation in his voice, the commander of the prize party shouted. - Answer, finally!

Some man got up in the boat and shouted in German: "We are Norwegians ..." - he did not have time to say more - someone hit him on the legs and the screamer fell into the boat.

The searchlight beam from the Sheer now illuminated the boat and the people silent in it.

"I warn you - no tricks," Engels shouted, threatening him with a pistol for greater persuasiveness. "Row to the cruiser or! ..

Some man, who apparently was an officer, made a sign to Engels with his hand that he understood everything, and the boat headed for the Sheer. Lieutenant Engels thought that the man who was shouting in German was probably a Norwegian collaborator and began to worry that the others would throw him overboard.

But the boat had already approached the side of the tanker, and the lieutenant stopped thinking about it. The tanker was modern, clean, freshly painted, called the Sandefjord. Clearly, he was Norwegian. But Norway was an occupied country, and as far as Engels knew, Quisling's pro-German government did not send any of its ships into the ocean. Any Norwegian ships on the high seas now worked for the British. So the Sandefjord tanker was quite legally considered an enemy ship. The tanker captain looked nothing like what Engels thought a Norwegian captain would look like, but he announced that he was Norwegian, and no one on the prize crew knew Norwegian. The captain, on the other hand, did not understand German (or pretended not to), and it was not at all easy to deal with him.

To all questions regarding the cargo, where it comes from and where, the captain answered evasively or did not answer at all. The only thing that could be understood from what the captain said through gritted teeth was that he was a neutral and did not want to answer any questions from the Germans.

A search made in the captain's cabin turned up the ship's papers and several curious documents.

— You were going to Freetown? Engels asked. "And your cargo, as I understand it, was intended for the British?"

The captain was silent.

"Silence is a sign of consent, as far as I understand," Engels continued. "Now take a look at this.

And the lieutenant handed the captain of the tanker a copy of the radio message received from the Maritime Ministry of the Royal Norwegian Government in Exile, to which he was subordinate captain.

"It says here," Engels explained, "that all Norwegian ships on the high seas must henceforth be subject to the Norwegian government-in-exile, which enjoys the full support of the British government.

The Norwegian continued to remain silent.

"Be kind, captain, get ready to leave the ship immediately," Engels summed up. "I'll give you thirty minutes. Not a minute more.

The Norwegian finally spoke in English and asked:

Will you sink my tanker? - and in the light of the searchlight, Engels saw that tears were running down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Engels answered. "You understand that I didn't start this war. And I understand that you didn't. At least this way you will get home faster than through England. Consolation at least with this, - and, slapping the Norwegian captain on the shoulder in a friendly way, Engels went on to inspect the ship.

Under the protection of a German sailor, the captain began to collect his belongings. Then he took a bottle of gin and a couple of glasses from the locker, offering the sailor a drink. He refused, citing the fact that he was in the service. "Service is service, and schnapps is schnapps."

"And my service is over," said the captain, and drank the glass.

After the fourth glass the captain calmed down and sighed.

"I'll get home sooner...

When he was pouring the fifth glass, the head of Lieutenant Engels stuck his head through the cabin window and said:

- You know, captain, we probably won't sink your tanker. - I can't say for sure yet, but I don't think we will. The inspection showed that the tanker was in first-class condition, filled with valuable grades of fuel and fully deserved to be brought to some German port.

In addition, an almost empty hold was found in the bow of the tanker, in which it was possible to place prisoners who were still on the Sheer and Nordmark. Kranke really wanted to relieve himself of responsibility for the fate of the women captured on the Port Hobart.

The prize crew was ordered to bring the tanker to Andalusia. By 22:30, when all issues were settled, the Sheer resumed the search for enemy ships.

XIV

At two o'clock in the morning, a combat alarm tore off the officers and sailors of the Sheer from their beds. Directly ahead, the navigation lights of a ship were found. Under the cover of darkness, the Scheer cautiously approached the discovered vessel for about a thousand meters, trying to determine its nationality. Only "neutral" could walk in wartime with navigation lights on. But the possibility was not ruled out that some British ship, masquerading as a "neutral", decided to turn on navigational

lights.

- Shall we get closer? the navigator asked the commander.

"It seems to me that this is a Portuguese," replied Kranke. "Let's not risk it." Sometimes it happens

It's better to just politely step aside. Let him go.

The unknown ship continued on its course, completely ignoring the presence of the Sheer. It carried not only navigational lights - the bridge and deck were illuminated, and entire streams of light escaped through the open portholes. The steamer seemed like a vision from some other world.

The next morning the signalmen reported that a ship had been sighted heading north. This did not cause any reaction on the bridge, the alarm was not broken. People looked at each other in surprise. According to available information, the British aircraft carrier "Hermes" was still in full readiness on the island of St. Helena. South of St. Helena, there was a heavily guarded convoy that on Christmas Day unsuccessfully tried to attack the German heavy cruiser Admiral Hipper. The convoy was escorted by several warships, including the aircraft carrier Furies. They were all too close, and this required great caution. Therefore, Kranke decided to go on a parallel course with the discovered vessel, temporarily keeping out of sight.

At 15:00, a new report from the signalers followed: "The tops of the masts on the bearing are eleven degrees port."

The situation was getting interesting. The vessel, which appeared to the left of the bow, was on the opposite course with the Sheer. The masts of the ship were already clearly visible, and soon the upper part of the chimney rose above the horizon. It was impossible to pursue both detected vessels, since they were going in opposite directions. How to determine which one is more valuable? Or: which of these ships is British and which is on a British charter? Perhaps both ships are British or carry cargo for the British. Cranke simply did not have time to think over all these questions thoroughly. He had to make an instant decision and act quickly.

"Let's try to cheat, gentlemen," Kranke turned to the officers on the bridge. "Let's play the role of an English patrol cruiser.

At full speed, the Scheer went east. Kranke's plan was to pass between them in a short moment, when both ships came abeam each other, and stand in such a way that these ships practically did not see each other. And give the English code a signal to stop.

When the corresponding signal was raised on the Sheer, a ship approaching from the north immediately turned aside, exposing the Sheer to the stern. There was nothing unusual about this. According to the instructions of the British Admiralty, any captain, upon discovering a warship, was to turn aside, positioning his vessel in such a way that it was the smallest target, and then consider his further actions. If the ship turned out to be English, then such a turn would no longer be possible in the future.
didn't matter.

The British ship raised her identification, and the Sheer signaled to her with a semaphore: "I must give you secret instructions. Come to me!"

The idea could not enter the head of the English captain that in these waters a German raider could impersonate a British cruiser, and therefore the captain decided to obey, turned around and moved closer. On board the Sheer, they watched with interest how the runaway sheep itself returned to the mouth of the wolf, covered with sheep's skin. Many on the bridge bet that the English captain would not comply, and lost. To divert the attention of the British captain and prevent him from carefully examining the Sheer, Kranke bombarded him with semaphore signals, demanding an answer. At the same time, two guns of the bow turret were raised up, and the third was lowered down to the limit in order to create

the captain had the impression that the turret was two-gun, for everyone knew that three-gun turrets were the hallmark of German pocket battleships.

"Have you noticed any suspicious ships or vessels in the area that might be enemy?" - the steamer was requested from the Sheer under the smiles of everyone on the bridge.

"No," an approaching British ship signaled. "Nothing suspicious was found."

"Do you have quinine? - they signaled from the Sheer. - We have very little of it left.

"I'll find out in the infirmary."

"I will be very obliged to you if you find the opportunity to share with us."

A similar game was played with a ship approaching from the opposite side. As a result, both English steamships, coming closer and closer to the Sheer, themselves went into a trap. Everything indicated that the captain of the first vessel did not suspect anything at all. But it was

not this way.

Firstly, the captain was not an Englishman, but a Dutchman, and from the very first minutes after the discovery of the Sheer, he began to doubt the correctness of his actions. Having changed course in accordance with the instructions of the Admiralty, he immediately wanted to report by radio about the appearance of a warship on his course, but then began to hesitate. An enemy warship in the Gulf of Guinea? It was incredible, and the captain didn't want to look like a fool. The ship that appeared could only be a British cruiser. To make sure of this completely, the captain called to the bridge three English naval officers who were on board his ship. True, one of them was an officer in the medical service of the fleet.

"Look at this ship, gentlemen," suggested the captain. "I'm not entirely sure it's ours.

"Don't worry," one of the officers assured the captain, glancing at the Sheer. "This is our Cumberland-class cruiser.

"I'm not sure," another officer objected to him. "He has a very high superstructure. On the Cumberlands, it is much lower.

"It's an optical illusion," said a third. "The hot air makes all the lines look distorted and blurry. In addition, you can see that he is camouflaged, and therefore it is very difficult at this distance to determine how he really looks.

"I assure you, captain," the first officer continued to convince, "that the Hans would hardly have risked a large ship in these waters after the incident with the Admiral Spee." And in general, only a pocket battleship, with its diesel engines, can reach these waters. But they have completely different superstructures, and most importantly, there are three-gun turrets on the bow and stern. No, I think it's a Cumberland-class or maybe a London-class cruiser. You may not...

The officer wanted to say: "You can be sure," but the captain interrupted him sharply:

No, it's German! Look, it's a pocket battleship!

The Scheer was now no more than three thousand meters from the ship, and all her guns were aimed at the unfortunate steamer. Both of its three-gun turrets were clearly visible.

- Report it on the radio! shouted one of the officers, a submarine lieutenant who, a minute ago, was proving to the captain that he had a British Cumberland-class cruiser in front of him.

"Don't yell, I'm not deaf," the captain replied angrily. "It's too late to go on the air. I have a wife and children in Holland and I would like to see them again. Not to mention I have a lot of civilians on board. One of their volleys will tear us all to pieces ... By the way, they

signal "stop".

"They won't shoot right away," the lieutenant tried to interrupt him. "Give me the radio, captain." Only "R. R. R." and your place. That will be enough to get help from Freetown or St. Helena.

"And it's enough for him to send us to the bottom," the Dutchman remarked gloomily. "They will open fire as soon as my radio operator touches the key." No, we missed our chance to announce it on the radio thanks to your assurances that it was Cumberland. I made a big mistake in believing you, and I no longer wish to follow your advice. One mistake is enough, - and with these words the Dutch captain, with an irritated movement, turned the machine telegraph to "stop". His face burned with anger. Then, unable to contain his rage, the captain tore off his cap with a white cover and threw it on the deck of the bridge.

One of the English officers picked it up, dusted it off and handed it back to the captain:

- In a few minutes the Germans will come on board ... The captain should be in a cap.

The motorboat with the prize crew had already left the Sheer and was heading towards the ship. Soon menacing-looking, broad-shouldered German sailors, armed with pistols and hand grenades, climbed on deck. Looking at them, the Dutch captain thanked fate that he did not listen to the British officer and did not report anything on the radio.

All formalities were completed quickly. Ten minutes later, a message was sent to Scheer:

"The prize is the Dutch steamer Barneveld, 5200 gross register tons. Cargo - military equipment and supplies for the British army in Egypt, including aircraft, trucks, bombs and shells. The ship is sailing from England, intending to pass around the Cape of Good Hope. Two calls were supposed - to Cape Town and Aden. The port of unloading is Alexandria.

Meanwhile, the commander of the prize crew, Lieutenant Petersen, looked with some doubt at the people who were introduced to him as passengers on the ship.

"It seems to me," said the lieutenant, "that they don't look very much like civilians. The captain, according to him, does not have a list of passengers. We must try to find this list.

However, there was no time to clarify the details yet. It was necessary to deal with the second ship, which suddenly stopped approaching and returned to its westerly course, apparently believing that the English cruiser was conducting a routine inspection of ships on the high seas and not knowing anything about the drama that had unfolded. To reinforce this impression, the Barneveld, now run by a prize-winning team, moved on its old course. From it, the Sheer received a signal "the ship is under our control." Having given the move and increasing the speed to twenty-six knots, the Scheer rushed after the second steamer. There was no time to get the motorboat on board, and it bounced in tow astern of the Barneveld.

Radio operators carefully listened to the broadcast. How will this boat do? Will he report on the Scheer or not?

But nothing happened. The steamer obediently stopped, and her captain, dressed in his best uniform, waited on board to inspect the officers of the Royal Navy. Of course, when he learned the truth, he was shocked, but outwardly remained completely unperturbed.

The vessel turned out to be English, under the name "Stanpark", with a carrying capacity of 5600 gross register tons. It went from Bombay to England with a cargo of cotton. As a prize, the ship was not at all interested in Kranke, and he decided to blow it up. While the Stanpark team was being transported to the Sheer, Lieutenant Petersen left the Barneveld on a motor boat, moved to the Stanpark and began to prepare the ship for the explosion. He sent the boat to the Scheer, where a non-commissioned officer sent by him reported to Kranke that the passengers found on the Barneveld were in fact soldiers and sailors, including several submariners. Petersen wondered if it would be better to transport them to the Sheer?

- Immediately! ordered Kranke. "Three officers, forty-five soldiers and sailors, plus forty-three men of the Dutch crew against fifteen Germans?" So, does it work? It is strange that they have not cut all of ours there yet!

At that moment, Stanpark reported that everything was ready for the sinking of the ship.

- Stoke! Kranke ordered.

The prize crew left the ship, and seven minutes later, which always seemed like an eternity to the demolitionists, the first explosion thundered. Then, at intervals of a few seconds, other explosions followed. The Stanpark quickly sank a few meters into the water and then stopped. Apparently, the steamer kept afloat thanks to its cargo of cotton. A fire broke out in the middle of the ship, quickly engulfing it from bow to stern.

"We don't need such illumination at all," said Kranke. "Hurry up the sinking!"

Miner "Scheer" Lieutenant Schulze received an order to finish off the ship with a torpedo. The torpedo was fired from a remote control on the bridge and passed by about four hundred meters from the Stanpark.

"Try another one, Schulze," Kranke ordered calmly. "By the way, where is the boat that was astern of them about two minutes ago?"

- From the port side, Herr Captain of the First Rank! the signalman reported.

- Right apparatus, salvo! Schulze commanded at that moment.

By an unfortunate coincidence, the boat at that time appeared from the starboard side of the Sheer - just opposite the torpedo tube, and precisely at the moment when the torpedo release button was pressed on the bridge.

A ten-meter torpedo, jumping out of the apparatus, hit its tail section on the gunwale of the boat and, apparently, damaged its rudders. From the bridge you could see how she began to describe strange sinusoids, and then turned around and rushed straight at the Sheer. Everyone was numb with fear.

The Scheer machines were not working, and Kranke was unable to perform a deflection maneuver. And the greenish-bubble trail of the torpedo was rapidly approaching the ship. There was dead silence on the bridge. All this was so incredible that no one had yet time to realize what had happened: now the Sheer would be blown up by one of her own torpedoes! Only one gunner had the guts to joke. He told his comrades: "Tomorrow another victory report will fly to Berlin: the Admiral Scheer has torpedoed a heavy cruiser off the coast of Cameroon."

But again a miracle happened. At the last moment, being only twenty meters from the side of the Sheer, the torpedo suddenly sank. A general sigh of relief swept through the ship.

"You were right, Voitsekhovsky," remarked Kranke, addressing the head of the communications service.

- I? - the officer was surprised. - I did not say a word, commander.

"You were right in repeatedly asserting that the Sheer is a happy ship," Kranke turned to the miner, white as death, and ordered:

"Try again, Schulze. God loves trinity.

- Eat! replied the shocked miner.

Deathly silence again reigned on the Sheer. All with

fearfully waited for what other surprise the torpedomen would present. But this time nothing happened. The torpedo hit the burning English ship. A column of water, flame and smoke shot up high into the sky. Debris flew into the air. The ship actually broke in half. Giant flames erupted from the holds. When the Stanpark sank, a large spot of burning fuel oil remained on the surface for a long time.

So far everything was calm on the air, but fuel oil continued to burn, a bright flame could be seen from a very long distance after dark, and this could become an alarm signal for the British. We had to leave immediately.

However, Kranke ordered to move not to the east, but to the west, with the maximum speed that the captured Barneveld was capable of.

At the very first rays of dawn, the crew and passengers began to be transported from the Barneveld to the Sheer. They were ordered to bring warm clothes, linen, toiletries and shaving supplies, everything down to toilet paper. Carrying bags and suitcases with them, they moved to the Sheer.

Among them there were quite a few blacks in well-fitted pea jackets, but the sailors from the Sheer were no longer surprised by the blacks. The center of attention was an old Indian who claimed to be Mahatma Gandhi's secretary. His ascetic face, due to the yellowness of his skin, resembled ancient parchment, and he himself looked like a statue that had stood for thousands of years in an abandoned Buddhist temple, which is deeply indifferent to human joys and sorrows, like all other earthly passions. Even the most disbelieving sailors of the Sheer noted the strange energy that this old man radiated, although, of course, they could not explain anything.

Meanwhile, it was also decided to destroy the Barneveld, and while people were being transported, all preparations for the sinking of the Dutch ship were made. The first explosion sounded muffled, giving neither fire nor smoke, resembling the sound of a gong. Then, in rapid succession, four more explosions were heard, also apparently without any effect.

The Dutch ship was sinking very slowly. Through small holes, water could not quickly fill the holds and the engine room. At least ten painful minutes passed before it became noticeable that the ship was sinking into the water. But a good half hour passed before the Barneveld really began to sink. The stern began to sink first, and on the Sheer they heard the hiss and whistle of the air displaced by the water. The steamer began to slowly list to port, then straightened up and rolled to starboard, straightened up again, as if looking for the most convenient position in which she should rest on the ocean floor.

The ship was sinking lower and lower, the waves were already rolling over the upper deck, the bow

rose slowly. The last bits of air left the ship's interior with a sound like the last breath of a dying man. And "Barneveld" disappeared into the abyss. Something surfaced from its holds - mainly the planes of combat aircraft with the markings of the Royal Air Force. Kranke ordered the speed to be increased to twenty-four knots, turned around the place of the death of the Barneveld, as if giving him posthumous honors, and ordered him to lay down on a southwesterly course. For the next twenty-four hours, all work in the Scheer, except for absolutely necessary ones, was stopped, and the crew was given a long-deserved rest. The last three days, many have spent no sleep at all, doing very hard work.

The disappearance of the Barneveld and the Stanmark remained a mystery to the British command throughout the war, until the combat magazines of the Admiral Scheer fell into their hands. Only then did the British learn about the true fate of the two ships that disappeared without a trace.

XV

In the dead of night, Scheer's radio operators received a radio message from Berlin, where the fleet command informed Kranke that the auxiliary cruiser Penguin, under the command of Captain First Rank Kruder, had captured three Norwegian whaling floating bases, which were fully loaded, and eleven whalers without a single shot and losses. .

It was very important, the radiogram stated, that all mother ships (due to the extreme value of their cargo) and whalers, who could easily be converted into patrol ships, be brought into German-controlled waters. Since Penguin itself is able to allocate only one prize team, Scheer and Nordmark were instructed to allocate their personnel for this purpose.

Kranke was ordered to respond within twenty-four hours. The commander of the Sheer did not like the order at all. The allocation of such a number of officers and sailors to prize teams significantly reduced the combat readiness of his own ship, which he reported to the command in a response radiogram. Berlin reacted quickly, informing Kranke that his objections were taken into account and understood, but nevertheless the order must be carried out, and the Scheer's personnel would be replenished when the next supply ship arrived. Whale oil was an extremely important raw material for Germany. Krank didn't have a choice.

Apart from the officers of the prize team, Petersen and Blaye, only Lieutenant Kraft remained, who could be assigned to the task without much damage. The rest were either second lieutenants or ship's midshipmen, who, according to Kranke, were not at all ready to take on such a burden of responsibility. In addition, none of them had a navigational diploma. At the naval school, of course, they were taught to use a sextant and navigational

almanacs, but they had no tactics.

On board the Scheer there were enough sextants, logarithmic tables and navigational almanacs captured from sunken ships, but the British, Dutch and Norwegian tables differed from the German ones and a certain experience was required to be able to use them. I had to hastily organize the necessary retraining at the Sheer. Junior lieutenants and midshipmen learned day and night to take the height of the sun with sextants and use navigation tables, as they say, to dizziness. Their training was supervised by Kranke himself. Apart from this, the service on the "Sheer"

went on as usual. Watches changed, scheduled repairs were going on, then food and sleep, and everything started again. Such is the life of a warship on a long voyage.

The Sheer was again full of prisoners. The previous ones were handed over to the Nordmark and Duquiez, but many new ones arrived. They were allowed, subject to certain rules, to go out on the upper deck to breathe fresh air. The British, even in captivity, retained their pride and arrogance, looking contemptuously at the German sailors. They recognized only each other, treating everyone else with contemptuous indifference. They were silent, and if they spoke, it was only in interjections. The Dutch were phlegmatic, fuller than the slender English. They preferred to sit on the deck rather than walk back and forth on it, as the British did. Even in the smoking of pipes, their national character was manifested. The British pipe protruded from the mouth aggressively defiantly, while the Dutch - peacefully hung down.

The Norwegians didn't walk on deck like the English, but they didn't sit like the Dutch either. Like statues, they stood motionless by the rails and looked out to sea. Most of them were huge broad-shouldered guys with blond hair and blue eyes, reminiscent of those northern giants that were described by Tacitus and Caesar.

Separately from everyone, mainly from the British, was an old Indian - Gandhi's secretary. Kranke singled out two sailors who served the old man, took him out on deck, where he sat in a deck chair, looking into space. The old Hindu hated the British and was sure that as a result of this war his country would throw off the English colonial yoke and gain independence. Kranke himself liked to talk with him, since Gandhi's secretary turned out to be a well-informed, well-read and intelligent person. However, it was difficult for Kranke to follow the logic of the Indian of the highest caste, who equally despised all Europeans who lived in the delusions of their pride.

"Scheer" again arrived in "Andalusia", where he found "Nordmark" and "Duquiez". Only the slow-moving Sandefjord did not arrive.

Scheer took fuel and replenished supplies from the Nordmark. Kranke wanted to hold a meeting to develop a plan for further action.

"Thor" was in the South Atlantic, and from the north, the auxiliary cruiser "Kormoran" was coming to join them. The auxiliary cruiser Penguin was also in the South Atlantic with the captured Norwegian whaling fleet. He had to come to Andalusia to join the prize teams and deliver his prizes to Germany. One auxiliary cruiser Atlantis operated in the Indian Ocean.

According to reports received from Berlin, Kranke knew that the battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, as well as the heavy cruiser Admiral Hipper, would soon begin operations in the northern and central Atlantic. Therefore, the commander of the Scheer decided that it would be better if he moved to the Indian Ocean in order to cause the same commotion on the English shipping lanes there as in the Atlantic. Kranke informed the command in Berlin about his intentions and received full approval. Kranke was to operate off the southern part of the East African coast, and Rogge, the commander of the Atlantis, was to operate in the north.

Using the parking lot, the divers examined the Sheer's rudders, and the sailors armed with rifles drove away the sharks that immediately appeared from them. Meanwhile, the Sandefjord arrived at the Andalusia with the precision of a passenger liner. Kranke planned to transfer his prisoners to the ship, for which it was necessary to replenish the ship's food supplies and equip additional washbasins and latrines there. On all prize ships, there was no difference between the food that the German sailors received and that was given to the prisoners. This was the rule.

There was a little turmoil on the Sheer. The ship was preparing to leave not only the prisoners, but also the officers and sailors of the prize teams for the Norwegian whalers. The prisoners walking along the deck looked with surprise at the crowd of German ships. Everyone was especially surprised by the huge Nordmark, which flew under the American Stars and Stripes flag and had on board the false name "Dixie".

When the prisoners were transported to the Sandefjord, prize teams lined up on the deck of the Sheer, which are at the disposal of the captain of the first rank Kruder, the commander of the Penguin. They were commanded by Lieutenant Kraft. Kranke gave the prize crews a farewell review, and they were to board the Duquiesse to await the arrival of the Penguin and the captured Norwegian whaling fleet.

The Sandefjord successfully completed its journey to Europe and, without encountering a single enemy ship along the way, arrived in German-occupied Girona. After the repair, the ship entered service with the German fleet under the name "Monsun". She was sunk by the British on 11 August 1944 off Nantes.

The captured Norwegian flotilla also arrived safely in German waters, apart from two whalers who ran into a British convoy near the Bay of Biscay and were scuttled by their crews.

Two huge whaling mother ships, Ole Wegger and Solglimt, were brought into German-controlled waters by two former captains of the merchant marine: Lieutenant of the Reserve Petersen and Blaye. The third Norwegian mother ship "Pelagos" was sent to Germany earlier with the prize crew of the "Penguin".

One of the small whalers was kept by Captain First Rank Krüder as the "second eye" of the auxiliary cruiser Penguin. The whaler was renamed Adjutant and happily escaped the sad fate of the Penguin itself, which was sunk on May 8, 1941 south of the Seychelles in a fierce battle with the British cruiser Cornwall. After the death of the Penguin, the Adjutant managed to join the German auxiliary cruiser Komet, whose commander used a small vessel as a minelayer. The Adjutant successfully set up several minefields off the coast of New Zealand, and on July 1, 1941 was flooded by the crew on the orders of the Comet commander.

The captured Norwegian mother ship Ole Wegger was sunk in the port of Rouen on August 26 by British aircraft, and the second mother ship Solglimt was destroyed in the port of Cherbourg on June 29, 1944. The further fate of the third mother ship "Pelagos" and whalers is unknown. Twenty-two thousand tons of whale oil captured from these mother ships was used to make margarine and helped solve the food problem in Germany.

For reasons of secrecy, for a very long time nothing was known about this unique naval operation carried out by the commander of the auxiliary cruiser Penguin, Captain First Rank Ernst-Felix Krüder.

XVI

The calendar showed January 28, 1941, which confused the Sheer sailors. It was the height of summer in the Southern Hemisphere, and the thermometer rose to 50°C on the upper deck. And in the engine room the temperature was even higher. But even on the upper deck, people fell from their feet from the unbearable heat, and there were many thanksgiving prayers when

the ship resumed moving south, heading for a new operational zone - the southern part of the Indian Ocean.

Leaving the Andalusia and passing by the Nordmark and the Duquiesca, the Scheer saluted with flags. The prize crew of the Duquiesca and the crew of the Nordmark, lined up on the decks, saw off the Sheer with loud shouts, waving their hands and caps. An announcement was made over the ship's broadcast of the Sheer: "Sailors, take a farewell look at our" Floating Delicatessen ". You won't see him again, and you won't feast on his supplies. The Penguin will transfer everything and everyone to the whalers and sink the Duquiesca.

There was no other way out - the Duquiesca's coal bunkers were completely empty, and there was nowhere to get coal. Everything that could burn has already been burned in the furnaces: cabin furniture, deck planks, hold hatch covers, wooden doors, and even a piano from the officer's salon. "Nordmark" dragged "Duciesza" in tow, but everyone understood that this would not last long

Maybe.

As the Sheer moved south, it became cooler. At times, the icy breath of Antarctica was already felt. Four days after leaving the Andalusia, the Sheer reached the latitude of Cape Town. The weather began to change dramatically. The first herald of the impending storm was a pair of albatrosses that appeared over the Sheer, which, burying its nose in the oncoming wave, made its way to the south. Soon there were eight albatrosses. They circled over the ship, striking with a wingspan of up to three meters. Huge birds, like dive bombers, suddenly fell down with loud cries and soared up again from the very surface of the ocean. Some of them dived onto the deck of the Sheer, flying over the very heads of people and, it would seem, taking pleasure in the fact that the sailors frightenedly shy away from them for cover. Strong and elegant, they easily flew at the same speed as the Scheer. One of the birds even landed on the Arado seaplane, suspiciously examining its "competitor" with a motor.

The Scheer made its way further and further south. The temperature continued to drop, soon dropping to ten degrees. For sailors accustomed to the tropical heat, it was cold. As the temperature dropped, the number of albatrosses circling above the ship increased. Soon there were at least fifty of them, and, with a certain amount of imagination, one got the impression that they were tied to the Sheer by some invisible threads.

Then the day came when the last patch of blue sky was covered with black clouds, and the air temperature dropped to zero. An icy wind blew towards the ship, reaching storm strength by evening. During the night, the Sheer crossed the fortieth degree south latitude and entered the traditional zone of South Atlantic storms.

The "Roaring Forties" met the "Sheer" as expected: with huge waves and the howl of a hurricane, reminiscent of the roar of heavy artillery.

The giant waves crashing against the ship seemed like living prehistoric monsters, who, with a deafening growl, were trying to destroy the steel alien that appeared in their domain. But the Scheer was not so easy to destroy. Fighting the storm, she turned east to round the Cape of Good Hope out of RAF range.

The ocean rolled towards the Scheer with incredibly huge greenish-foaming waves, which can only be seen here - at the confluence of two oceans between the Cape of Good Hope and Antarctica. Experienced English captains called these ramparts "monarchs of the seas", and for those who have never seen them, with the richest imagination, it is difficult to imagine even approximately what these terrible creatures of the boundless

the energies of nature. It is here that man is best aware of his defenselessness and weakness in comparison with the mighty forces that rule the planet. The Sheer groaned and howled like an organ played by the devil. The shafts rolled over the ship, crashing behind the bow superstructure and falling off the stern in ferocious waterfalls. The storm began to subside only two days later, when the tanker changed course to the northeast, towards Cape Agalkhas. It became noticeably warmer again, and the water of the Indian Ocean delighted the eye with soft blue hues.

On the morning of February 6, when Kranke went into the wardroom for coffee, the senior mechanical engineer reported to him that a small Dutch chicken had been found in the engine room of the Scheer, smuggled onto the ship, apparently from the Duquiesse. The hen lays eggs regularly. Kranke ordered that the chicken be put on allowance and that egg laying be noted in the logbook of the engine room in the column "Special Incidents". The following entries appeared in the log:

"February 6, 15:00. south of Madagascar. The clock has been moved forward by half an hour. The hen laid one egg. If you believe the entries in the journal, the chicken regularly performed its difficult duty.

"Admiral Scheer", being south-east of Madagascar, was moving in the middle course, more and more leaning to the east. Having risen above thirty degrees south latitude, the ship turned due east, hoping to enter the shipping lanes leading from Australia to South America and Europe around the Cape of Good Hope. For five days, all the efforts of the signalmen to find something in the desert ocean did not yield any results. Not even a single "neutral" came across. One got the impression that the entire area was declared free from navigation.

Meanwhile, on February 14, Scheer had a secret rendezvous with the auxiliary cruiser Atlantis, whose commander, second-rank captain Rogge, had specifically asked the fleet command in Berlin about this. The rendezvous was set southeast of the bank of Saia de Malha at a point with coordinates: ten degrees south latitude and sixty-five degrees east longitude.

Everything had to take place in complete radio silence. Only if one of the ships, for operational or other reasons, could not arrive at the rendezvous at all, he had to report this by a specially transmitted signal by radio.

Kranke went to rendezvous with the Atlantis, hoping to get some new information from Rogge, who had already been successfully operating in the Indian Ocean for several months, about the routes of British shipping in these waters. In addition, he also hoped to agree on the interaction of both ships.

Heading to the rendezvous point, the Scheer first followed a north-easterly course, bypassing Mauritius, and then turned north.

On this course, the ship quickly entered the south trade winds. The heat began to torment again, the sun mercilessly burned from the blue sky. The heat, combined with high humidity, became unbearable. The crew of the "Sheer" again found themselves in the atmosphere of the "Turkish bath". I remembered the words of an old sea song: "We are standing off Madagascar with the plague on board," although no one had the strength to sing.

Quite unexpectedly and suddenly, on February 12, a steep wave went to the Sheer, through which the ship made its way with great difficulty. At the same time, neither the barometer nor visual observations of the sky gave the slightest hint of such a sharp change in the weather.

Kranke knew from experience that such a large wave is usually overtaken by a raging somewhere

nearby, a hurricane is a frequent occurrence here at this time of year. So, slowing down, Kranke veered to the northwest to avoid the likely area of the hurricane.

According to the forecaster officer, such a decision by the commander was a waste of time. The day before, the forecaster gave a lecture in the wardroom, which was broadcast throughout the ship. The theme of the lecture was: "Winds of the Indian Ocean".

Defant focused on the famous hurricanes in the Mauritius region, focusing in particular on those signs by which these hurricanes can be predicted in advance. The forecaster was careless enough to point out that none of these signs were present at the moment. Including there is no typical yellowish haze rising over the ocean on the eve of a hurricane.

As usual, the commander was present at the lecture in the wardroom, speaking a few introductory and closing words. This time, Kranke said that with all due respect to the knowledge of a professional weather forecaster, he could not agree with him - a hurricane was coming, and in the evening everyone would be able to see who was right.

The commander was right.

By evening the wind had changed. The sky was covered with heavy gray clouds, and then a storm came from the northwest, intensifying every minute. The strength of the wind quickly reached seven or eight points. Now no one doubted that the commander had acted very wisely, changing course so as not to fall into the center of a hurricane moving south.

On February 14, at 08:00, the Sheer arrived at the rendezvous point with the Atlantis. There was no Atlantis yet. Since the stars had been obscured by clouds for the past thirty-six hours, it was impossible to pinpoint exactly where the Scheer had been blown off course by the wind and currents. However, in the evening, the sun came out from behind the clouds, and the exact location of the ship was quickly determined. It turned out that the ship was somewhat northwest of the desired location. I had to go down a little to the south, to the real meeting place. The Atlantis navigators also made a slight mistake in their calculations, and their ship left southeast of the given place.

At 16:00, the signalers of the Sheer and Atlantis saw each other through the haze hanging over the surface. A signal was raised on the Atlantis: "Greetings to the German squadron of the Indian Ocean!"

In addition to the Atlantis, in the Indian Ocean there was a steamship of the Hanseatic line Tannenfels of the same type, which was currently in Mogadishu in Somalia. English troops approached Mogadishu, which forced the Tannenfels to be ready to leave this port: on board the Tannenfels were officers and sailors of the prize crew, as well as two hundred and sixty-four prisoners from the Yugoslav steamer Durmitor, captured by Atlantis in the Sound Strait.

The captain of the first rank, Rogge, decided to send the Tannenfels back to Europe - to German-controlled waters.

Atlantis brought two "prizes" with her: the British bulk carrier "Speybank" and the tanker "Ketty Bravig" with a cargo of excellent diesel fuel. Despite the stormy sea, the captain of the first rank Rogge arrived at the Sheer, making everyone worry. From the bridge of the Sheer, it seemed that the flimsy boat of the commander of the Atlantis would be swamped by waves and capsized. Rogge had been operating in the Indian Ocean for a year now and could provide Kranke with invaluable information, answering questions prepared in advance by the Scheer commander. Kranke listened attentively to his colleague, making brief notes in his notebook.

The meeting with the Scheer was very joyful for the crew of the auxiliary cruiser, as they expected to get some sleep under the cover of the 280-mm guns of the pocket battleship. Scheer gave them the opportunity to relax a little - the first time in a year.

The "German squadron of the Indian Ocean", moving away from the hurricane, decided to rise to the north, where the sea should have been calmer. This made it possible for the sailors of Atlantis to visit the Sheer, and for the Sheer itself to replenish fuel supplies from the tanker Ketty Bravig without interference.

In the morning, specialists from the Sheer checked the quality of the fuel on the tanker. It turned out to be not only excellent, but also best suited for Scheer diesels. The captain of the first rank Kranke regarded this as a miracle. He did not even dare to dream that he would be able to replenish fuel supplies while near Madagascar.

Rogge informed Kranke that all shipping routes now do not go across the ocean, but are pressed against the shores. The commander of the Atlantis suggested that Kranke choose an operational area north of Madagascar - opposite Mombasa, where he would surely find many enemy ships.

Rogge himself intended to move to the area south of the Seychelles, where, in his opinion, all ships would rush to learn of the presence of the Sheer north of Madagascar. After the operation was completed, both commanders agreed on a new rendezvous if the Sheer could arrive at it. Kranke was waiting for the order to return home and, having received it, could not waste time, since the nights in the Iceland region were getting shorter every day.

Having finished operational matters, both commanders engaged in a very pleasant barter. Rogge offered to supply the Scheer with Ceylon tea and excellent Candian honey, and Cranke, in turn, offered the Atlantis a large quantity of eggs taken from the Duquiese. In addition, excellent Argentinean ham went in exchange for high quality Burmese rice. Kranke presented the Atlantis's saloon with several cases of Moselle wine, and Rogge presented the Scheer's saloon with as many cases of captured Scotch whisky.

On the Atlantis they eagerly attacked the latest German newspapers, although they were the newspapers of October 20 last year. Atlantis had been on the raid for almost a year, receiving no mail and little knowledge of what was going on in the world. Very rarely it was possible to catch on the radio at least some German radio station, which, as a rule, was quickly lost.

Aircraft mechanics from the Atlantis helped repair the long-suffering ship's parrot from the Sheer. The Arado seemed to have caught a cold in the southern climate. He constantly coughed, spat and choked like an asthmatic.

Meanwhile, the hurricane had passed, the wind had completely died down, and the heat that was exhausting the crew had returned. The water temperature on the surface of the ocean reached thirty-three degrees, and in the room of the main diesel engines it rose to sixty-six.

XVII

February 17 "Scheer" again went in search of prey. During the night, a neutral steamer was discovered, but the Sheer bypassed it and returned to its old course, which led it to the operational zone north of Madagascar. The meeting with the "neutral" was

auspicious sign. Where there are "neutrals", there must be Englishmen.

The next morning, Lieutenant Pitch took off in his Arado to survey the new area. Each flight was now associated with great risk, since the old "ship parrot" had almost nothing left of the original plumage. At 09:50, Pitch returned and reported that he had located a northbound ship about sixty miles from the Aldabar Islands, which belonged to Britain. The Sheer headed to the place indicated by the pilot, but in the afternoon, when, according to all calculations, the steamer should have appeared within sight, nothing was found.

Pitch volunteered to fly out again and look for the steamer.

At the moment when the Arado was catapulted into the air, the signalman shouted:

- Two masts on bearing twenty!

- It is he! someone on the bridge exclaimed, but Kranke shook his head dubiously. It's someone else. In addition, Pitch did not return, although he should have seen this steamer immediately after takeoff.

Perhaps they will be able to make another "double", as they did in the Gulf of Guinea.

At 14:00, the combat alarm was broken, and the sailors fled to their combat posts. The two masts rose above the horizon and became a tanker sailing south, that is, in the opposite direction to that of the steamer that Pitch had discovered at dawn.

The Scheer was approaching a new victim with the sun astern, which must have prevented the tanker's signalmen from accurately identifying the approaching ship. Kranke decided to repeat again the same trick that led to success in the Gulf of Guinea. Approaching the tanker for ten thousand meters, lifting two guns on the towers up, and lowering one down to vaguely resemble British cruisers, Kranke began to exchange signals with the tanker.

The captain of the tanker was not surprised by the appearance of the warship. He knew that British cruisers were patrolling in the area, since there were reports of several German raiders operating in the Indian Ocean. Without any suspicion, he began to respond to the signals of the Sheer. By this time, the Scheer had already come close enough and shocked the captain of the tanker with a new signal: "Stop! Don't use the radio! Otherwise, you will be destroyed immediately!"

Now both Scheer turrets were pointing all six of their guns at the tanker, looking very impressive and menacing. From the Sheer's bridge it was clearly visible how the English gunners were running towards the tanker's stern gun.

Kranke watched all this, hoping that the tanker would have the sense not to engage the pocket battleship and that the English captain would abandon suicidal heroism in the name of common sense.

But the tanker's gun slowly crawled along the side towards the Sheer.

- What brave men! Kranke was astounded. They can clearly see that the heavy cruiser is in front of them, but they are ready to fight!

Kranke did not want to open fire. He signaled to the tanker: "Don't be stupid, captain! Get your men away from the gun and turn off the radio!"

The English gunners withdrew from the gun, having no doubt received the appropriate order from the bridge. The tanker's radio was silent.

"Wonderful," Kranke sighed with relief. "I really didn't want to arrange a bloodbath for them."

The prize crew, which soon arrived on the British ship, reported to the Scheer that it was a 6,994 GRT British Advocate tanker carrying 4,000 tons of crude oil and 4,000 tons of gasoline bound for Cape Town. The vessel is armed with a 102 mm gun at the stern and an anti-aircraft machine gun on the superstructure. Lieutenant Engels, who commanded the prize crew, suggested capturing the tanker rather than sinking it. True, as it turned out, the British managed to disable the pumps pumping fuel from tanks to the car, but for experienced mechanics of the Scheer it would hardly have been very difficult to put them back into operation.

At this time, Pitch returned, reporting that he had again found the first steamer, continuing to go north a little east of where the Scheer was now.

Kranke ordered Lieutenant Engels to take the captured tanker to the rendezvous point with the Atlantis and wait for the Scheer there, while he himself decided to take on the second ship. The Sheer quickly caught up with the second steamer, passed on its starboard side, and then began to cut its course. It was beginning to get dark, and the ship turned on navigational lights.

"Give the name of the ship and its nationality," flashed a signal light from the Sheer.

The ship was silent for a long time. Apparently, his captain took a long time to recover from shock. Finally, he was answered in a language that none of the signalers knew. The watch officer, after looking at the message, stated that it was transmitted in Greek.

From "Sheer" they demanded to repeat the message in English.

"Steamboat Gregorios, the country of Greece," came the reply from the ship.

The ship was neutral. It was annoying. From him they probably considered who they were dealing with. But, on the other hand, what does a Greek do in these waters? Is he smuggling? Kranke decided to make sure of this. The prize crew, whose commander was well instructed on all matters relating to neutrality, was ready to leave the Sheer, but at that moment the Greek ship was asked to identify itself by the Sheer signal. Kranke did not want to do this at all, but out of fear that the Greek would report him on the radio, he ordered to answer evasively - they say, his own people and that's it. It was necessary to buy time until the prize crew knocked out the radio station of the Greek ship.

It seemed to Kranke that an eternity had passed until the lieutenant who commanded the prize team returned to the Sheer to personally report everything to the commander.

From the captured ship's papers, it appeared that the SS Gregorios (2,546 gross register tons) was sailing from New York to Athens with a cargo of Red Cross materials. All papers are in order.

"Wait a minute," remarked Kranke. "On this course, he was supposed to pass the Suez Canal. Is he carrying his cargo to the British? But, on the other hand, the ship is neutral, there is a signed declaration of the Red Cross about the nature of the cargo. I'm afraid nothing can be done..."

There was a pause, then Kranke asked the lieutenant:

- Did you ask the captain why he goes from New York to Athens in such a strange way - around the Cape of Good Hope? It's five times longer than going straight through

Mediterranean Sea. It's like going from Hamburg to Plymouth around Iceland. If they really are carrying Red Cross materials, then what is the point for the captain to make such a detour? I'm not talking about material losses.

"Of course, I asked him about it," the lieutenant reported.

- Interesting! Cranke was surprised. "And when following the Suez Canal, the British cannot capture this steamer?"

After thinking for another minute, Kranke ordered:

- Senior doctor to the bridge!

When Lieutenant Colonel Schweder of the Medical Service arrived on the bridge, Kranke asked how he was doing with medicines and medicines. It turned out that very little of both remained, since a lot of medicines, especially bandages and painkillers, were transferred to the prize ships. Kranke pointed out that the Maritime Prize Law allows taking medicines and medicines from neutral ships, and suggested that the doctors go to the Greek ship and take part of the necessary there with the obligatory subsequent notification of the prize ship.

Medical lieutenant Konrad went to the Gregorios. Soon a signal followed from him that he was returning to the Sheer with important information. Konrad went up to the bridge with several sailors who were carrying an open box.

"Look, commander," suggested the doctor. "Wadding was written on the box." On top, it really turned out to be ordinary cotton wool, and under it were the component parts of the machine gun.

"Very interesting," Kranke was delighted. "How is it with Homer?" "Beware of the treacherous Greeks?" This is how we will do it. We need to check the whole load!

An additional work party was sent to the Gregorios. The cargo has been carefully checked. Parts of machine guns were found in all the boxes examined. In addition, the holds contained armor plates, steel sheets, tires for aircraft landing gear and other military materials. It was now very doubtful that the ship was bound for Athens. Rather, to Aden or some Egyptian port. But in any case, the verdict on Gregorios had already been passed. The captain understood this and did not protest. Without a doubt, he knew what kind of cargo his ship was carrying, hiding behind the authority of the Red Cross. Another thing was surprising: how could such a country as the United States so rudely trample on the authority of such a well-known international organization? This once again spoke of a very strange understanding by the United States of its neutrality.

Before letting the Greek sink to the bottom, the commander of the prize party offered to transport all the boxes of chocolate powder to the Sheer. Kranke agreed, warning only that all work be completed an hour before dawn. At 07:20 "Gregorios" was launched to the bottom.

- Farewell, "Gregorios" - one of the German officers on the bridge paraphrased the Greek classics.
- We will tell the Spartans, who respect the law, that you were a liar.

"Ship parrot" took off in search of new victims.

Although no one had slept a wink the previous night, Kranke clearly did not want to waste time resting the crew. At 09:15, the Arado returned, and Pitch reported the sighting of a steamer sailing in relative proximity to the Sheer. The sides and superstructures of this ship were painted white, warning that she was "neutral" or disguised as "neutral". The steamer was heading south, and Kranke thought that the "neutral" would hardly have taken such a course. Where does it come from and where does it go?

American ships traditionally always chose the shortest routes and did not at all take into account the harsh circulars of the British Admiralty establishing the routes of English and allied shipping. The ships of other neutral countries in this part of the world ocean came across extremely rarely. Kranke decided to take a closer look at the white ship, no matter whose flag it was sailing.

Kranke ordered to lie down at the intersection of the course of an unknown ship. In the afternoon, everything was repeated - as in the frames of an old film - all over again. The tops of the masts appeared above the horizon, then the combat alarms sounded, and the sailors, having said goodbye to their dreams of dinner, fled to their places. It was already getting dark when the Scheer, appearing behind the stern of the ship, began the old game. The signal requested the name of the vessel and its port of registry. The ship responded with a cipher group of four letters. There was no such combination of letters in the book of the set of international signals, and while the coders under the leadership of the captain of the second rank Buddha puzzled over a new riddle, on the bridge of the Sheer they pretended to understand the answer and raised a new signal: "I have secret orders for you".

"What kind of orders?" they asked from the ship.

"You need to change course. I am sending you a boat with instructions on your new course," the Sheer signaled.

Meanwhile, the Scheer signalmen were carefully examining the ship, trying to determine whether it was armed or not. It seemed to some that they saw a gun on its stern, others were not sure of this.

But the ship, which responded with a strange cipher message, was in itself very suspicious, which obliged us to behave with extreme caution.

In the meantime, they signaled from the ship: "You have no right to stop us on the high seas. We are Americans!"

The captain of the second rank Buddha appeared on the bridge of the Sheer.

"We figured it out," he reported. "The Admiralty has entered a code for identification signals. This is a Canadian ship "Canadian Cruiser" from Halifax.

"Immediately tell the name of the captain and the name of the ship," they demanded from the Sheer.

"Captain Smith. "Canadian Cruiser" - answered from the steamer.

You are right, Buddha! Kranke exclaimed. "This is the Canadian Cruiser.

"Write to him," Kranke ordered the signalmen: "Stop immediately. I'm sending a boat with secret orders for you!"

The bluff continued.

The Canadian Cruiser stopped, but no sooner had the boat been launched from the Sheer than the ship started again.

"Stop immediately! - ordered to signal Kranke. - Do not force me to open fire. You are being very suspicious."

"You too," they answered from the ship. "You behave like Germans!"

"Indeed," Kranke agreed and again ordered the signal to be raised to the steamer:

"Stop immediately!"

But the ship did not even think to obey. On the contrary, in response, he immediately increased his speed.

The Scheer also increased its speed to full speed and the pursuit of the impudent Canadian began.

A motor boat launched from the Sheer, which had seven knots of the main course, ended up between the Sheer and its victim.

Ahead loomed the silhouette of a Canadian ship in a light haze, and behind, beautifully projected against the background of the sunset, the powerful silhouette of a pocket battleship was approaching. At this moment, the Sheer opened two powerful searchlights, brightly illuminating the pursued vessel.

— Look! someone exclaimed on the bridge of the Scheer. "It really is a neutral!"

In the beams of the searchlights, the stars and stripes of the American flag, painted on the sides of the ship, were clearly visible, and under the bridge, in two-meter letters, the inscription "USA" was white.

The Canadian Cruiser clearly had no desire to stop. The water behind its stern seethed from working propellers.

- The enemy went on the air with the signal "R. PP," the radio room reported to the Sheer's bridge. "He gives his name and place and gives the text:

"A heavy cruiser is following me."

Kranke ordered to send a signal light to the boat:

"Akhtung! Let's open fire!"

Having warned the boat, Kranke ordered to open fire from 37-millimeter anti-aircraft guns. No one on the bridge believed that this ship was really American, but the boat, which was dangerously close to the ship, did not allow Kranke to operate with heavier guns. The first volley flew over the ship, but in the second volley the shells hit the bridge and the superstructure. In the beams of searchlights, clouds of smoke and debris flying in different directions were visible.

It was reported from the radio room that the ship's radio operators were continuing to report the attack, and already the Mauritius, Aden and Mombasa confirmed the receipt of the R. R. R. Then, somewhere nearby, an aircraft carrier also confirmed the receipt of the R.R.R signal.

And the Canadian Cruiser continued to be bombarded with shells. The course of the ship fell, and, finally, it stopped. There were no guns on the ship, and therefore it did not respond to fire.

The boat from the Sheer came up to the side of the pseudo-American, and a storm ladder was thrown off him - right through the American flag painted on board. The commander of the prize team from the Sheer, climbing the ladder, soiled his white trousers on the freshly painted flag.

A gigantic sailor met a German officer on deck. The ship's chief officer built the entire crew on the forecastle, apparently without any illusions about the fate of his ship. There was no captain. He was found later in the cabin, sitting in a chair.

At the sight of the German officer entering, he stood up and declared:

- I protest. I am an American and this ship is American.

"I'm here just to make sure of that," replied the commander of the prize team.

"How dare you open fire on my ship?" - the captain continued, playing well, indignantly. - This is a violation of all international laws! You are committing a crime.

"Show the ship's papers," interrupted the flow of protests the commander of the prize crew. "This will give us the opportunity to verify the true state of affairs and find out how many US citizens are on board.

"We are all Americans," the captain insisted.

At that moment, the head of the Sheera communications service entered the cabin. Kranke sent him to the captured ship because of Wojciechowski's excellent knowledge of the English language.

Meanwhile, the ship's documents could not be found. The first mate referred to the captain, the captain - to the first mate. As a result, they were found under the mattress of the captain's bunk. The documents clearly showed that all members of the steamer's crew were British subjects. Not a single US citizen was on board at all. But the captain, as they say, continued to fight to the death. He insisted that the ship belonged to the United States.

He found absolutely fantastic answers to all questions.

When asked why, as an American, he violated the rules of neutrality known to him and radioed an alarm, he replied without batting an eyelid that there was nothing of the kind. He was shown copies of the radiograms of the signal "R. R. R. Then the captain said that, apparently, his crazy radio operator had completely lost his head from fear and he, the captain, could not be held responsible for such an act.

When asked if there were weapons on board, the captain answered with a categorical "no": no weapons, not even revolvers and hunting rifles. Meanwhile, a machine gun and three hundred cartridges for it were found on the bridge.

"The machine gun belongs to me personally," replied the captain. "This is my private property, received as a gift from American friends. She is inviolable. I used it to shoot sharks. Great sport! Want to try?

It is not known what the captain was trying to achieve, but with his behavior he rather amused the officers of the prize team than angered them.

However, everything was clear. The Canadian Cruiser was a British ship trying to disguise itself as an American. After listening to the report of the commander of the prize team, Kranke ordered the ship to be prepared for sinking. The ship's crew was ordered to move to the boats. Everyone obeyed, except the captain, and no persuasion could force him to obey. I had to use force.

Five powerful demolition charges easily sent the Canadian Cruiser (7178 gross register tons) to the bottom. According to Lloyd's Register, the ship was actually owned by the Canadian National Shipping Company and was assigned to Halifax.

The use by the British to camouflage the flag of the United States of America had not yet been observed by the Germans and forced a more thorough check of all American ships. Since the location of the Scheer was now known to the enemy after the radio message from the sunken ship, Kranke broke the radio silence and reported to Berlin the circumstances of the sinking of the Canadian ship.

Six hours later, German radio announced to the world that British ships were using the American flag as a camouflage.

In turn, Berlin informed Kranke that he must break off the raid and return to Germany as soon as possible, preferably at the end of March.

Further, Kranke was informed that the Führer "with great pleasure" awarded him the Knight's Cross.

The General Naval Staff sincerely thanked the crew of the Sheer for their service and reported that ten Iron Crosses of the First Class and one hundred Iron Crosses of the Second Class had been allocated for the crew of the pocket battleship.

Having sunk the Canadian Cruiser, the Sheer began to move south at full speed. The ether literally seethed from the radio exchange between Aden, Ceylon, Mombasa and South Africa! The alarmed British formations in the Indian Ocean region took measures to intercept and destroy the Sheer. We had to get out of here before it was too late.

In addition, Berlin insistently demanded a return to their native waters by the end of March, and it was already February 21st. Should have rushed.

The senior officer Gruber was also nervous. Having entered into a conspiracy with the head of the communications service, they hid from Kranke the fact of awarding him the Knight's Cross. They intended to report this to the commander in a more solemn atmosphere, with the formation of the crew.

But Kranke did not allow to call the crew to line up under the conditions of the raid on the Sheer, and as a result, the delay in reporting the radiogram from Berlin turned into several days instead of several hours, which was already a serious incident. In the meantime, the conspirators were thinking how to get out of the situation they had created, the combat alarms sounded again on the ship.

"Sheer" literally stumbled upon a ship. But it was really bad that the Sheer was clearly seen from the ship against the background of a clear northwestern horizon. Everyone was waiting for what decision the captain of the first rank Kranke would make.

Many knew that the Scheer needed to get out of that huge ring that was now being built by the English fleet as quickly as possible in order to catch it. Was it possible under such conditions to linger in order to deal another painful blow to English shipping?

The captain of this ship must have already been informed of the presence of a German raider in the area, and he would not be able to trick the Scheer with the issuance of an English cruiser that has "secret orders." While the Sheer was pondering the situation, it was excitedly reported from the radio room that an unknown ship had gone on the air with the signal "R. R. R. It was already really bad. Now the British knew the second place of the Sheer and could well understand what course the ship was heading, trying to avoid the networks they had set up.

The ship, whose displacement at first glance did not exceed three thousand tons, continued to radio a distress signal, reporting its position and the course of the Sheer. This left Kranke with only one option: to destroy this ship from a great distance, that is, from

with the help of three-gun turrets of the fifth caliber. In other conditions, it was like trying to crack a nut with a steam hammer. The first salvo of 280 mm guns brought huge columns of water very close to the small steamer. The falling shells of the second salvo on the Sheer were no longer seen.

A huge bright rainbow rose straight from the sea between the Scheer and its victim, completely blocking visibility. The captain of the second rank Schumann fired another volley, taking into account the course and speed of the steamer, but he could not observe the results.

A moment later, a tropical downpour hit the ocean. Streams of water crashed onto the deck of the raider, merging overboard like from an overflowing aquarium. Visibility dropped to fifteen meters. The people who found themselves at that moment at the open posts of the upper deck and superstructures in shorts and T-shirts managed to freshen up under the downpour like never before during the entire trip. The rain stopped as suddenly as it started. The sky rose, the clouds disappeared, and the little steamer was only three thousand meters from the Sheer. This time, the Sheer opened fire with a secondary caliber, giving the order to stop. The steamer obeyed, and a few minutes later the motorboat with the prize crew from the Sheer was already heading towards the unfortunate ship.

The ship turned out to be a 2,500-ton Dutch cargo ship Rantau Pantyang bound for Singapore with a cargo of coal. Most of his crew were Malays. When the Scheer achieved the first hit on the ship with secondary caliber shells, most of the Malays jumped overboard. Now boats with Dutch sailors were spinning around the steamer, catching the Malays from the water. The approaching German boat caused a new fit of horror among the Malays. They screamed loudly, covering their faces with their hands, fully convinced that their last hour had come. It took a lot of effort to force the Malays to stay in the boats and, under the supervision of phlegmatic Dutch sailors, head for the Sheer.

The prize crew found no major damage to the ship. There were two hits on the bridge and the bow cargo boom was broken. One Dutchman lay dead on deck and four Malays were seriously injured.

Kranke foresaw this and sent a paramedic with orderlies with the prize team. First aid was provided to the wounded, painkillers were given, and they were sent to the Sheer, where Lieutenant Colonel Shveder was already waiting for them in the operating room.

Inspection of the vessel did not reveal anything interesting. For a long time it was not possible to open the ship's safe. They wanted to blow it up with a hand grenade, but, unfortunately, nothing came of it - the safe was intact, and one of the German sailors almost died. When, finally, the safe was opened, they found some letters, pay slips and some money there.

The ship's refrigerator was also locked, but when, after some effort, it was opened, many apples were found there, which in this part of the world could also be considered a delicacy. The rest of the refrigerator, to the great dismay of the sailors, was filled with chicken eggs, which many could no longer look at without shuddering.

At 12:30, explosive charges planted in different parts of the Rantau Pantyanga worked, and soon the small ship that had given the Scheer so much trouble and betrayed the British in its place disappeared from the surface of the ocean forever.

As soon as they managed to place new prisoners on the Sheer, the combat alarms sounded again. But this time the signals sounded a little different: short - short - long - short. Not everyone immediately realized that an AIR ALARM had been broken on the ship! Since the Sheer left the northern latitudes, the ship and forgot to think about air raid alerts. And now it sounded again, warning of the possibility of an attack from the air.

Far away on the horizon—at least twelve miles—a tiny line drifted slowly against gray clouds. It was, no doubt, an aircraft, but at such a distance it was impossible to determine its type. Judging by the distance from the nearest land, it must have been a Sunderland bomber.

The barrels of the Sheer anti-aircraft guns stirred. The plane could not have been a Sunderland, but a reconnaissance aircraft that had risen from an aircraft carrier. We had to reckon with the possibility of an attack by British carrier-based aircraft.

The Sheer was also noticed from the plane, and the pilots approached. From the rangefinder post it was reported that the distance had decreased to ten miles. Obviously, the pilots wanted to keep track of the Sheer, staying out of the range of fire of its anti-aircraft guns.

Lieutenant Pitch was already trembling with excitement, asking the commander for permission to take off to attack the enemy aircraft.

"Give us a chance to shoot him down, Mr. Captain of the First Rank," Pitch pleaded with the commander. "Firstly, we will immediately determine whether he is ground-based or deck-based. And secondly, we will try to destroy it ..."

"I like your fighting spirit, Pitch," replied the pilot Kranke, "but I do not agree that you have any chances. Your Arado is ready to fall apart at any moment. And secondly, what are you going to shoot him with, dear Pitch? Or have you forgotten that your 20mm cannon was dismantled long ago?"

"But we still have a machine gun," the pilot objected ardently. "One lucky hit and..."

"You can't rely on a lucky hit," Kranke shook his head. "If those guys are luckier, we'll never see you again." They don't even have to hit you. Your Arado will fall apart from the noise of their cannons and machine guns. Besides, we don't have time to take you back on board.

As soon as the enemy aircraft was detected, Kranke immediately ordered a course change from southeast to east, and then to northeast, hoping to mislead the British as to their future intentions. This course "Scheer" continued to go for about an hour after the plane disappeared. Judging by the long radiogram the aircraft transmitted, an air attack had become very likely. It could be carried out by shore-based aircraft from an airfield in the south of the Seychelles or carrier-based torpedo bombers from an English aircraft carrier prowling somewhere nearby.

The anti-aircraft gun crews remained at their posts until dark, but nothing happened. "Sheer" again laid down on a southeasterly course. The state of alert was maintained throughout the night, since contact with the enemy was very likely, and, as always happens in such cases, the radar was out of order.

Since everyone was at combat posts at night, Dr. Schweder sat all alone in the wardroom and listened to German shortwave radio transmissions. They transmitted an official message about the success of the Sheer and about awarding its commander with the Knight's

Cross. Upon hearing this news, Dr. Schweder rushed to the bridge and was the first to congratulate the commander on the high award. This news spread through the ship at the speed of light, and for a while people stopped even thinking about the ships of the English fleet darting around. The only person in whom this news caused a fit of irritability was, of course, Captain Second Rank Gruber. But he also went up to the bridge, brought his congratulations to the commander and apologized to him, being in full confidence that Dr. Schweder learned about the award not by radio, but due to information leaking from the radio room.

"What are you apologizing for, Gruber?" - Kranke was surprised. - Because you were late with your congratulations, and were not the first, as usual?

The senior officer repented of plotting with the liaison officer.

"Understood," laughed Kranke. Here, it turns out, what's the matter!

The fun on the bridge was interrupted by a message from the radio room: in the immediate vicinity, judging by the handwriting and the speed of transmission of radio messages, two British warships were talking.

After the war, it became known that at the time of the Sheer sinking of the Canadian Cruiser, a hundred and twenty miles to the north was the English cruiser Glasgow with a displacement of 10,000 tons. For the next twenty-four hours, the British cruiser rushed south at a speed of 32.5 knots, which was six to seven knots faster than the speed at which the Sheer left. This allowed the English cruiser to directly approach the raider. At the same time, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Naval Forces in the South Atlantic detached the heavy cruiser Australia (speed 31.5 knots) and the light cruiser Hawkins from the escort of the convoy crossing the equator. From the escort of the convoy, located to the south, the light cruiser "Emerald" was singled out, which had a speed of 33 knots. From Mombasa left: the Hermes aircraft carrier and the Cape Town cruiser, which had a speed of 29 knots. And finally, the heavy cruisers Canberra (31.2 knots) and Shropshire (32.3 knots) sailed north from the Cape of Good Hope to close the double encirclement around the Sheer. The aircraft seen from the Sheer was not the Sunderland, but an airborne reconnaissance aircraft from the cruiser Glasgow, which at that moment was only thirty or forty miles away, with orders to locate the Sheer, maintain contact with it and try to attack him under cover of darkness. The intercepted radio message, apparently, was transmitted precisely from the Glasgow, which was only twenty-five miles from the Sheer, dispersing with her during the night.

The rest of the night passed uneventfully, and when the sun broke and rose, the sea around the Sheer was deserted. The only solution for Scheer was to leave the area as quickly as possible. Kranke decided to try to break through between Mauritius to Madagascar, but before he even had time to think about it, fortune once again smiled at Scheer. In the silent ether suddenly sounded the call signs of a ship, the captain of which gave his place (twenty-two degrees south latitude and fifty degrees east longitude) and reported that he saw two cruisers going north.

The British naval radio station in Mauritius immediately silenced the ship's radio and put the alarm down. But the Scheer radio operators, fortunately, managed to intercept this radiogram, and when Kranke read it, he sighed loudly. It was a sigh of relief. The course he laid led directly to two British cruisers, whose commanders, no doubt, would have been very glad to see him.

The Sheer changed course to the east, and later to the southeast, trying to get away from the enemy ships surrounding it. Only twenty-four hours later Kranke allowed

to end the alarm, and the exhausted people got the opportunity to rest a bit.

Kranke's goal of penetrating the Indian Ocean and causing a commotion on the shipping lines of this ocean, considered the "inland pond of the British", was achieved. All the warships available in this theater were alerted to the sea in search of the Sheer. Transports with the most important military cargo were delayed in ports, convoys were formed with strong guards, aircraft combed the ocean. All this continued until the British Admiralty received information that the Sheer had left the British Pond and was returning home. Kranke hoped that by keeping on an easterly course he would be able to make contact with his British Lawyer prize. He made a short request to Berlin, asking the General Staff to contact Rogge and Engels to change the place of the rendezvous, moving it to the northeast, where it was safer. This proposal was not very happy with the commander of the Atlantis, Rogge, who did not want to appear in the western Indian Ocean at all after the pogrom that the Sheer perpetrated there.

Since there was no response from Berlin to Kranke's proposal to change course, the Scheer at full speed, taking all precautions, headed for the old rendezvous point, where no one was found. Kranke decided to send Pitch to inspect the surroundings, but the oncoming downpour and increased wind made the flight of the Arado impossible. However, Kranke believed so much in the skill of Captain Engels, the former captain of the line of the North German Lloyd, that he was not very worried about the British Advocate. (Indeed, Engels brought the ship to one of the French ports captured by the Germans.)

In the afternoon, "Scheer", despite the risk of a sudden appearance of the enemy, stopped the cars and drifted. Despite Dr. Schweder's best efforts, one of the Dutch sailors died.

A guard of honor in dress uniform was built at the stern of the Sheer. Opposite the guard lined up the team of the Dutch steamer - white and colored together. Second-rank captain Gruber and the Dutch captain stood opposite each other. The deceased Dutch sailor was sewn into a bunk and covered with the Dutch flag.

Starting the funeral ceremony on the high seas, Captain 2nd Rank Gruber said:

"This man died as a gallant sailor in the line of duty. He became a victim of forces that we do not control, and therefore we will share the blame for his death.

What the Dutch captain said in response, none of the Germans understood, since the captain spoke Malay.

Gruber then recited the prayer of departure.

The dark blue waters of the Indian Ocean stretched in all directions from horizon to horizon under a blue dome of a cloudless sky. It was completely calm, and the German naval ensign hung at half-mast along the flagpole. There was not a soul on deck, except for the direct participants in this simple and short ceremony.

The command followed: "On guard!". The captain of the second rank, Gruber, put his hand to the visor, and, to the whistle of the boatswain's pipes, the body of the sailor was betrayed to the sea.

"Scheer" again made a move. Passing by the island of Mahe, they played a combat alert - Kranke believed that there might be a British airfield. Lieutenant Pitch and his mechanics reinstalled the 20mm cannon on the Arado, just in case. But nothing happened.

Two days later, Kranke ordered to take a course of two hundred and thirty degrees. The British were combing the ocean much further north, and this course looked safe.

On February 26 at 08:00, the long-awaited command finally rang out: "The crew line up on the quarterdeck!"

On behalf of the High Command, Senior Officer Gruber presented Captain First Rank Kranka with the Knight's Cross, an exact copy of which was made in the Scheer locksmith shop.

Kranke addressed the crew with a short speech:

"I know that today has filled with pride all of you, of which I am a part. In return for a high award, we will be ready to take on any new task that is set before us. Comrades, I am happy that on our ship I can rely on each of you.

Then Kranke told his sailors the news that everyone had long been waiting for: the commander-in-chief of the fleet ordered the Admiral Scheer to return to Germany.

XX

Although the order of the commander-in-chief delighted everyone on the Sheer, the sailors understood what a dangerous path lay ahead of them. It was necessary to go through the entire Atlantic, which was furrowed along and across by powerful and numerous formations of the British fleet.

In its northern part, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Home Fleet, Admiral Sir John Tovey, operated with his battleships and heavy cruisers, hunting for the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau. The enemy ships were waiting for the Sheer both in the Danish Strait and in the English Channel, so the chances of a safe return to their homeland looked very problematic.

Additional concern for Kranke was the fact that the radar on the Scheer had failed. There was a polar night in the Arctic, and it was very difficult to pass there without a radar imperceptibly.

Despite the strictest prohibition to disassemble the radar, as indicated in the secret instructions, Kranke allowed the radio mechanics to do this, hoping that they would find the reason for the failure of the equipment. They found the reason - the quartz block that generates outgoing pulses failed. It was impossible to repair this block under ship conditions, and Kranke decided to request a new block by radio. But there was no letter designation for the quartz block in the cipher book, and all Kranke could do was add the words "Quartz" to the letters "D" and "T", denoting radar equipment. The result was an encryption: "Dora-Tony-Quartz." In Berlin, they puzzled over this encryption for a long time, but, fortunately, they understood it correctly and promised to send a new quartz block on a submarine, which Scheer was to meet on the way. The entire block was no larger than a cigar box, resembling its own in shape, and there were no difficulties with its transportation.

Meanwhile, the Sheer was again rounding the Cape of Good Hope, and the logbook noted weather changes: hot, warm, cold, very cold, unbearably hot, etc. The ship was heading for Andalusia, a secret meeting place for German raiders,

operating in the ocean. However, on the way there, Kranke was again forced to stop the ship. During the operation in tropical waters, the underwater part of the Scheer was heavily overgrown with shells, algae and God knows what else. This whole company reduced the speed of the ship by almost a knot, and when breaking through to Germany, they really didn't want to lose this knot, and Kranke decided to clean the underwater part, taking advantage of the fact that, due to lack of fuel, the Scheer sat relatively high in the water. The ship was heeled first in one direction, then in the other, and the working parties on rafts and in rubber boats freed the underwater part of the Scheer from uninvited guests. Pitch circled the air, watching the horizon and keeping the Scheer safe from any possible surprises.

Cleaning the underwater part of the ship in such conditions is very difficult because of the constant pitching of the ship, boats and rafts on the ocean swell. The scorching sun also made work difficult, but in the end everything that was available was cleaned and repainted. Having finished all the work by the evening, "Scheer" set in motion, heading to "Andalusia" for a meeting with "Nordmark", scheduled for tomorrow, March 10, 1941.

Having met with the Nordmark, the Scheer replenished its stocks of fuel, ammunition and food (eggs and meat from the already sunk Duquesa), transferred the prisoners to the Nordmark and was ready to move on.

From Berlin, they reported the place of the rendezvous of the Scheer with the auxiliary cruiser Kormoran and the submarine U-124, which was supposed to deliver the quartz oscillator unit. The rendezvous was scheduled northeast of St. Paul's Reefs.

Saying goodbye to the Nordmark, the Scheer went north.

The next German ship, with which the Scheer received an order to meet, was the blockade breaker Portland. Since the Portland did not have a cipher machine, Kranke had to convey to him the instructions of the General Naval Headquarters and information about the operational situation in the Atlantic. In addition, Kranke handed over to the Portland the captain of the Canadian Cruiser and two other prisoners, whom he did not hand over to the Nordmark, fearing that they would organize a mutiny there or something of that kind, which was not so difficult, considering a large number of prisoners accumulated on the Nordmark.

Transferring them to the Portland, Kranke warned the commander of the blockade breaker that the Canadian captain was one of those people who were ready for anything, and he needed special supervision.

During the Portland's journey across the south and central Atlantic, the Canadian captain gave no cause for complaint. But when the blockade breaker entered the Bay of Biscay, over which British aircraft made constant flights, the idyll ended.

One morning, the commander of the Portland saw smoke pouring from the ventilation mushroom of one of the holds, drawing attention to his ship. At first, the commander thought that some kind of spontaneous combustion had occurred in the hold, but then, remembering Kranke's warning, he sent armed sailors with a light machine gun into the hold. Compressed air was supplied to the ventilation pipe, which suppressed the smoke, sending it into the hold. Soon the prisoners in the hold began to suffocate and swear at what the world stands.

After waiting a little, the German sailors opened the hatch of the hold, and from there the prisoners began to crawl out, coughing and wiping their tears. The Canadian captain was the last to come on deck. He also coughed, wiping his tears, but he was angry and aggressive. The commander of the Portland asked the captain to refrain from such tricks in the future, hinting that he, a sailor, would be very sad to shoot his colleagues in the profession. Canadian captain is nothing answered...

After the Portland, the Scheer met with the supply ship Alsterufer, sailing directly from Germany. The necessary materials were found on the ship to overhaul the Arado, which was quite dashing aboard the Sheer. But especially everyone on the Scheer was pleased by the fact that the Alsterufer had seized the mailbags for them, which was the first time since the Scheer had left German waters. In the letters, the sailors were mainly congratulated on last Christmas, and although the congratulations were somewhat late, everyone was extremely happy about them.

Without delay, "Sheer" went on. Now every hour was precious. But to everyone's surprise, the ship suddenly changed course. Kranke had good reason to go back about two hundred miles. It was necessary to rendezvous with the U-124 submarine and obtain a quartz block for the radar. In addition, a meeting was to be held there with the auxiliary cruiser Kormoran, heading for the Indian Ocean. Kranke was supposed to share his own experience with the commander of the auxiliary cruiser, as well as give him the combat logs of the auxiliary cruisers Thor and Atlantis, from which the commander of the Kormoran could learn a lot for himself.

useful.

At dawn the next day, the tops of someone's masts appeared above the horizon. Almost certainly it was the Kormoran, but just in case, a combat alarm was sounded on the battleship.

It was indeed a Kormoran, and U-124 stood at its side. The commander of the boat, Lieutenant Schultz, took the opportunity to take torpedoes from the Kormoran and not return to base.

Noticing the smoke of the Sheer on the horizon, the boat sank just in case, but, having identified the Sheer, surfaced. Its commander climbed out to the wheelhouse and signaled: "Congratulations, Sheer! I brought your 'cigar box!'"

"Thank you very much," Kranke signaled in response, "I am sending a boat to you. There will also be a surprise for you."

On the sent boat, the submariners were given freshly baked buns, a box of canned ham and, of course, the unchanged eggs from the Duquesa. While they were discussing various matters, Kranke, to his great relief, was informed that the quartz block had been replaced and the radar had been restored to working order.

Now the Scheer faced the last but most dangerous task - to make his way back to Germany through the narrow trap of the Danish Strait.

XXI

Continuing north, the Scheer crossed the equator, passed the NW trade winds with their decorative cumulus clouds, passed the Sargasso Sea and entered the temperate zone. The air became noticeably cooler. Relying on the expression that has already become an axiom that the Sheer is a happy ship, the sailors had no doubts about a safe return home and prepared for this event all their free time: they ironed their uniforms, brushed their shoes with brushes and cleaned the buttons on first-term pea jackets with velvet.

The North Atlantic, usually stormy at this time of year, met the Sheer with only

large swell.

The Scheer was part of the enemy's main operational zone, and the airwaves were filled with radio communications from British warships in the area searching for the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, which had recently carried out a very successful raid against British shipping in a vast area up to the Cape Verde Islands.

Tension grew on board the ship.

Berlin informed Kranke that the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau would return to their base at Brest sometime between the twenty-first and twenty-third of March, and that the heavy cruiser Admiral Hipper had left Brest in an attempt to break through the Denmark Strait and return to Germany.

At first glance, all these events made it difficult for Scheer to secretly break through home. But in Berlin it was believed that all the attention of British air reconnaissance was now focused on the French ports captured by the Germans, where they were waiting for the return of the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, because the Scheer had a good chance to slip through unnoticed.

Another problem facing Kranke was the danger that the Scheer and the Admiral Hipper would appear in the Danish Strait at the same time, and the detachment would be much easier to detect than a single ship.

The General Staff solved this problem by informing Kranke that the Hipper would begin the breakthrough on March 28, and the Scheer would follow.

March 22 "Scheer" has already reached the forty-fifth degree of northern latitude. The North Atlantic came to its senses and greeted the appearance of the pocket battleship with a ferocious storm. Black clouds covered the sky, and the strength of the northeast wind quickly reached seven points. It became much colder, visibility dropped. Officers and sailors changed into winter uniforms.

In the twilight light of early evening, at a distance of no more than ten thousand meters, a tanker was unexpectedly discovered, sailing alone on a westerly course. The target was very tempting, but not at this time. If the attacked tanker had signaled "R. R. R., then the English ships, like disturbed wasps, would rush into this area, and the probability of a safe return home would become very doubtful. So Kranke let the tanker go.

The next day, the storm turned into a hurricane. The strength of the northeast wind reached eleven points. The organ of Neptune again sounded at full power, raising giant waves that, with the roar of fabulous monsters, fell upon the ship.

The people on watch, dressed in full storm uniforms, tried to see something through the raging tornado. The eyes of the signalmen were watery from the wind and burned with salt spray. Every half a minute, the bow of the Sheer plunged into the waves, and it seemed to everyone that it would never rise to the surface, but would go to the bottom. But the prow of the ship rose from the chaos of the waves, shaking off the water, which rushed over the deck in stormy waterfalls. The barometer continued to fall.

As always in stormy weather, Kranke did not leave the bridge.

Under such conditions, it is very difficult to keep the ship on course and even more difficult to accurately determine his place.

The hurricane lasted two days and by March 25 began to subside. By the middle of the day "Sheer" was

at the southern tip of Greenland, and Kranke sent the ship to the Danish Strait. The heavy cruiser Admiral Hipper has already received a report that he managed to safely pass through the strait. The commander of the Hipper, Captain First Rank Meisel, informed Kranke that when the Hipper maneuvered among the ice fields, he discovered English cruisers to the south. So, despite the weather, the enemy continued to carry out guard duty in the strait, and one had to be extremely careful.

"Sheer" went north, being in full combat readiness. The gunners stood at the guns, all the doors and hatches were battened down in combat.

On March 26, the ship approached the southern entrance to the Danish Strait. The wind died down and the sea became much calmer. And visibility, unfortunately, has improved markedly. By noon the visibility was almost perfect, as usually happens on clear frosty days. The gulls circling around the ship spoke of the proximity of land. According to available information, the British deployed several air bases in Iceland, and their aircraft constantly patrolled the airspace between Reykjavik and Greenland. Under such conditions and with such visibility, it was almost impossible to pass unnoticed, but Kranke continued to guide the Scheer on a northwesterly course, keeping to the very edge of the pack ice, where, as he hoped, due to the difference in air and water temperatures, fog would inevitably form or at least a thick haze.

By evening, Kranke's expectations became a reality - the ship was enveloped in haze. Humidity reached one hundred percent, it became more difficult to breathe, but everyone was glad that the chances of slipping through unnoticed had increased.

At night, the haze cleared, and Kranke ordered the ship to be stopped, expecting that by morning nature would create more favorable conditions for a breakthrough.

At 05:00, fog descended on the sea, it began to snow. "Scheer" began to move. Forecaster Defant was once again the most important person on board. Having risen to the bridge, he reported that nothing good could be expected from the weather for several days. That is, it will be good and clear.

"And no hope?" Kranke asked.

"Nothing, I'm afraid," replied the Defant.

The Scheer was now on a course of seventy degrees at twenty knots. Light snow was falling, there was no wind. A haze hung over the edge of the ice, and in the center of the strait the weather was clear and frosty.

At 07:52 from the radar post they reported: "A large object at a rate of three hundred and thirty-seven degrees, a distance of twenty-two thousand meters."

No doubt it was an enemy cruiser that kept even closer to the edge of the pack ice than the Scheer. She was sailing on a sixty-degree course at fifteen knots.

"Probably one of their heavy patrol cruisers," said Kranke. "And, of course, he is looking for us where visibility is worse - near the edge of the pack ice.

- Judging by its course, - said the navigator, - it is heading for the narrowest part of the strait.

"That's for sure," Kranke agreed. "And, if I'm not mistaken, he's not alone." It is interacting with another cruiser moving along the opposite edge of the pack ice. And now they begin to converge in narrowness. We remain on the same course and increase the speed to

twenty-three knots!

"Are these the cruisers the Hipper reported?" the navigator asked.

"No," answered Kranke. "They are still ahead."

At 10:40 a.m., the radar post reported that the object's pulse began to fade, and soon disappeared altogether.

By noon the weather got even better. By 13:00, visibility was perfect, and Kranke ordered a ninety-degree course change to get even further away from the enemy cruiser patrols.

The Sheer turret guns were in full combat readiness, since contact with the enemy could occur at any moment. Moreover, the emerging sun finally dispelled the remnants of haze. The sky was blue and visibility was excellent. The Sheer was already too far to the northeast to go to the ice border. It remained to hope for the best and accept the challenge in the event of the appearance of English cruisers. After all, "Sheer" was stronger than any of them.

At 16:20, the signalmen found the tops of the masts and a massive chimney on the horizon at a bearing of sixty degrees.

- Here it is, the third cruiser, gentlemen! - exclaimed Kranke, ordering to change course to southeast.

For a while, the Scheer kept on a course of one hundred and forty, and then turned back to ninety. The horizon was clear, and Kranke realized that the signalmen of the English cruiser had not noticed him.

By the end of the day, the Scheer's signalmen, tired to death, were looking hopefully at the disk of the sun falling below the horizon. It was strange to watch this cold fireball, which in these latitudes gave nothing but light, and roasted them so mercilessly in the tropics.

Darkness was advancing from the east, gradually hiding the ship in itself. In the west, the sky was still blazing, rapidly turning purple.

At 18:00, the combat alarm was sounded again - the ship was approaching the northern exit from the strait. At 18:30, the command "Full speed ahead!" was given, and at the same moment a depressing report arrived on the bridge: the radar was out of order.

Kranke clenched his teeth: the weather and the imperfection of technology seemed to take up arms against the Scheer together, envying its luck. However, the operators promised to repair the radar by morning, believing that it was out of order as a result of a sharp change in temperature. Since the latest technology turned out to be so unreliable, it remained to hope for the traditionally excellent German optics and the excellent training of the signalmen.

At 19:30 on bearing ten, an enemy cruiser was again detected, heading east. Kranke ordered the rudder to be placed to starboard and slowed down to reduce the size of the bow breaker, as well as the noise from the propellers that could be heard by the acoustics on the enemy cruiser.

The Scheer was now on a course of two hundred and ten degrees, the distance to the English cruiser did not exceed eight thousand meters. The enemy cruiser also turned south, but it was not clear whether he did this by accident or pursued the Sheer? It was now clear that this was a heavy cruiser, and all the Scheer's guns were loaded with armor-piercing shells.

A short flash of light on board the enemy ship (someone lit a match or lighter) made it possible to accurately determine the distance to it. Kranke pondered: open fire or not? In night battles, the one who makes the first volley gets a huge advantage. But there was nothing to indicate that the signalmen of the enemy cruiser had found the Sheer. The British ship was sailing at fifteen knots, and her turrets, as far as could be seen, were turned on the diametrical plane. The officers on the bridge silently waited for the commander's decision.

But Kranke's decision was influenced by too many factors. Relatively close was Scapa Flow, the main base of the British fleet, where the British battleships were stationed, significantly superior to the Sheer in firepower and armor, and their speed reached thirty knots. In addition, British bombers stood in full readiness at the airfields of Iceland with suspended armor-piercing bombs, waiting only for the signal to take off. They will immediately appear in the air if the Scheer announces its presence by opening fire.

In the event of a battle, the Sheer would almost certainly have destroyed the English cruiser, but not so quickly that he did not have time to notify Admiral Tovey and many others about the appearance of the Sheer. Considering the proximity of Scapa Flow, the Sheer would in this case be intercepted for sure somewhere northeast of Iceland. And then in general it will be possible to forget about the safe return home from such a successful raid. And the death of the Admiral Scheer will so seriously affect the prestige of Germany that even the death of several English ships will not outweigh it, since the heavy ships of the German fleet can be counted on the fingers.

"Tell me, Schumann," Kranke turned to the senior gunner, "do they see us?"

"I don't think so," answered the artilleryman. "However..."

"Very well," Kranke interrupted him. "I understand perfectly well what your 'however' means." You want to sink it and you are sure that you can do it. I'm sure you will too, but for now it's best if we disperse peacefully.

Kranke ordered to take a little to the left, quite a bit, leaving all the guns aimed at the enemy. The distance between the ships began to increase and, despite the fact that the Sheer was moving at a speed of only seven knots, the enemy quickly disappeared from view on divergent courses. After a short time, Kranke brought the Scheer back to her old course and increased her speed to twenty-four knots.

However, the surprises of this night are not yet over. At 22:45, some flashing lights appeared on the horizon. They floated and hovered in the sky, launched from somewhere beyond the horizon or from the seabed. The lights flared up brighter and brighter, changing color from bright white to emerald, spinning in the sky in huge spirals of a mystical round dance. Unusual in size and majesty, the northern lights lit up in the sky above the Sheer, whose crew looked at this rare phenomenon of Her Majesty Nature with a mixture of fear and curiosity. Kranke, like everyone else, appreciated the mystical beauty of the northern lights that illuminated the sea for miles around, although this "celestial pyrotechnics" was completely out of place. The sea sparkled and shone like a tropical full moon. From the starboard side of the Sheer, the northern tip of Iceland was clearly visible, from the left - the fabulous diamond mountains from the kingdom of the gnomes sparkled and sparkled the ice cliffs of Greenland.

"Breakthrough with festive illumination, gentlemen," Kranke announced. "And right at the exit from the strait!"

The fact that the enemy was nowhere to be seen cheered me up a little.

The northern lights continued their magical performance for about an hour. Then it began to fade and soon completely disappeared, giving way again to pitch darkness.

night.

The worst was over, and the Scheer was on course sixty-four. However, there was no need to relax. It was still far from Norwegian waters, and at any moment one could run into a strong connection of the British.

At 04:45, the signalmen reported that they had located a large ship on a sixty-degree bearing. Judging by the superstructure, this is one of the English Nelson-class battleships. This is the only thing missing now! The Nelson, which had nine 406-millimeter guns, could destroy the Scheer with one volley.

Kranke ordered the speed to be increased to full speed and laid on a course of one hundred and thirty, since a sharper turn would have led directly to the Icelandic coast.

Then the commander of the Scheer went up to the signalers in order to more accurately identify who they had found: the Nelson, the Rodney, or the Hood, the largest and fastest battlecruiser in the world.

- Distance? Kranke asked.

"19,700 meters, commander," the signal foreman reported.

— 19,700? asked Kranke in surprise, looking through the binoculars. Check the distance!

- 19,700 meters, captain of the first rank. Error excluded!

Kranke looked through the binoculars again, laughed and said:

- It's not them. Break the alarm!

By mistake, an iceberg was mistaken for an English battleship, the upper part of which really resembled the superstructure of the battleships of the Nelson type, as everyone could see when it dawned.

"Admiral Scheer" continued to go at full speed, trying to move as far as possible from the huge "enemy aircraft carrier" called Iceland. Signalers anxiously watched the sky, the calculations did not depart from anti-aircraft guns and machine guns.

By noon, the "heavenly office" again took care of the "Scheer", sending a storm, low clouds and snow charges to the area of \u200b\u200bit location. The second piece of good news was the message from the radio operators about the introduction of the radar.

Having reached the sixtieth degree of northern latitude, the Scheer turned to the southeast. Kranke sent a short radiogram to Berlin: "I will approach Bergen at 05:00 on March 30th. Please turn on the beacon at the north entrance. Hans." That night, no one on board the Scheer slept, and with an error of several minutes from the time indicated in the radiogram, the Scheer arrived in Bergen. Before the beacon was lit at the northern entrance, the Scheer almost ran into underwater reefs twice. But everything worked out, and, having taken on board a pilot, the ship entered the port through a narrow channel, where it anchored at exactly seven o'clock in the morning on March 30, completing a five-month raid on the rear of the enemy.

March 30 was the birthday of Theodor Kranke, who thus presented himself with a gift. The Scheer was safe, but not yet at home. He was on his last leg of the journey.

In the middle of the day, Kranke discussed with the commanders of the destroyer flotilla the details of the passage of the Scheer from Bergen to Kiel. Late in the evening, Vice Admiral von Schroeder, Commander of the Naval Forces of the Western Coast of Norway, arrived on board.

At 19:30, the Scheer weighed anchor, left Korsfjord, and sailed towards Kiel at twenty-five knots. The sea, apparently wanting to once again test the "Sheer" for strength, met the ship with a strong storm, accompanied by a heavy wind. By dawn, the Sheer and the destroyer flotilla escorting her were at Kristan-sund.

"Can you give more than twenty-five knots?" - the commander of the destroyer flotilla requested a signal, wanting to quickly slip through the Skagerrak due to the danger of submarines.

"Of course," Kranke signaled back. "I was afraid you'd fall behind."

"Do not exaggerate your capabilities," they prosemaphored from the destroyer.

- Then full speed ahead! ordered Kranke and smiled.

Despite the fact that the Scheer had traveled forty-six thousand nautical miles, she was still capable of a speed of 27.6 knots. Kranke switched the telegraph to "Full Ahead" and it seemed that a whole flock of devils howled in the chimney of the pocket battleship. Trembling and vibrating with every rivet, the Scheer surged forward, squeezing every ounce of power out of its diesel engines. The destroyers, whose very sensitive high-pressure steam turbines had already been running at full power for several previous days, surrendered, one by one disappearing behind the Scheer's stern. During the passage of Kategat, after four hours of following at full speed, the Sheer slowed down, allowing the destroyers to catch up with themselves and resume escorting. In dense fog, the Scheer entered the Belt and arrived in Kiel on the first of April. Twenty-one flags were hoisted on the signal lines of the ship, reporting the tonnage of sunk and captured ships: 113,200 tons!

The first of April was a special, solemn day for the entire crew of the Admiral Scheer. Exactly eight years ago - April 1, 1933 - the ship was launched, "baptized" by the daughter of the famous Admiral Scheer, Marianne Besserer.

At 10:00 a solemn formation was played on the Sheer. The officers and sailors lined up in dress uniform on the upper deck. The commander-in-chief of the German fleet, Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, arrived on the ship. The commander-in-chief was accompanied by Admiral Guze and Vice-Admiral Schmud.

The Commander-in-Chief went around the line, thanked the sailors for their service, and then announced the awarding of the entire crew with the Iron Crosses - a unique case in the practice of the German fleet.

"The ship proved worthy of the glorious name it carries on board," Raeder announced.

The Commander-in-Chief dined in the officers' wardroom of the Sheera. He was served a huge dish on which steaks were buried in a garland of egg yolks. It was the memory of the Duquiez, which had long been resting at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

The Commander-in-Chief was stunned.

- It's all for me? he asked Kranke.

"Farewell feast, excel," explained the commander of the Sheer. "Today is the last time the officers and sailors of the Sheer take food without thinking about the food rations!" We got all these dishes from the Duquiesa refrigerator. It can be said that this

forced gift from Mr Churchill.

The Grand Admiral smiled.

— Yes, Kranke, of course! I remembered. I take a bite with pleasure - after all, this is your famous "floating delicacy"!

I read about it in the reports.

EPILOGUE

April 15, 1941 "Admiral Scheer" stood up for repairs in Kiel. While in the raid, many sailors of his crew hoped that the war would end before they returned to base. Now they had to be convinced of the opposite: not only did the war not end, but every day it flared up more and more. The Scheer was still under repair when the prophecies of the captain of the Duquesa came true - German troops invaded Russia. Then, in June 1941, the captain of the first rank Kranke surrendered command of the ship. The new commander was the captain of the first rank Meendsen-Bolken.

On July 1, 1941, the Admiral Scheer left the repair and headed for the Baltic Sea for post-repair tests and exercises.

On September 4, the ship was relocated to Oslo, but already on September 8, it received an order to return to the Baltic, where, together with the battleship Tirpitz, two light cruisers and three destroyers, it carried guard duty in the eastern part of the Baltic Sea in case the Soviet fleet broke through from Kronstadt to Sweden. On September 24, the pilot of the Scheer's airborne aircraft accidentally dropped two depth charges while making an emergency landing. The bombs exploded in close proximity to the Scheer, causing a strong shaking of the ship. The plane crashed, and on September 25 the Scheer was released to Kiel for repairs, where it arrived on September 26.

From Kiel, "Admiral Scheer" moved to Hamburg, where from September 29 to October 24, 1941, it was under repair at the Bloi and Voss shipyard. Having completed the repairs, the ship returned to the Baltic Sea for tactical exercises. On February 3, 1942, the pocket battleship arrived in Brunsbüttel, where it began preparations for redeployment to Norwegian waters.

On February 20, 1942, the Admiral Scheer, together with the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen, escorted by five destroyers, left Brunsbüttel, heading for Grimstadfjord, where the detachment arrived on February 22, repelling several British air attacks along the way. On February 23, the ships again went to sea, heading for Lo Fjord. During the passage, the British submarine Trident torpedoed and severely damaged the Prinz Eugen. "Happy ship" "Admiral Scheer" safely reached Lo-Fiord, where he stood from February to May, not taking part in the hostilities due to lack of

fuel.

On the night of May 9-10, 1942, the Admiral Scheer, with the Dithmarschen supply transport, escorted by four destroyers, moved to Bogenbucht. On May 25, another pocket battleship Lützow (formerly Deutschland) arrived there, accompanied by five destroyers and the Nordmark mother ship, the old companion of the Scheer on the Atlantic raid.

On June 4, 1942, Vice-Admiral Kummetz, who raised the flag on the Lützow, took command of the detachment, called "Combat Group 11".

On July 2, 1942, Scheer and Lützow moved to Kaa-Fiord, where on July 3

Vice Admiral Kummets transferred his flag to the Scheer.

July in Kaa-Fiord arrived "Combat Group-1" as part of the battleship "Tirpitz", the heavy cruiser "Admiral Hipper" and four destroyers. The command of both battle groups was taken by Admiral Schniewind, who was on the Tirpitz.

July 1942, "Tirpitz", "Admiral Scheer" and "Admiral Hipper" went to sea to attack the detected convoy. However, on orders from Berlin, where a British ambush was feared, the operation was aborted. The Admiral Scheer and the destroyers accompanying her were ordered to return to Bogenbucht.

At the end of July 1942, bearing in mind the proverbial luck of the Sheer, it was given the unique task of passing through the Northern Sea Route, destroying Soviet and allied ships coming to Murmansk from the Far East. The General Headquarters of the Japanese Navy informed its German allies that from the ports of the USA and Canada there was a flow of goods to the USSR by the Northern Sea Route, especially foodstuffs. On July 16, 1942, information was received that twenty large transports left Vladivostok for Kamchatka, and on July 26 they left Petropavlovsk, heading for the Bering Strait. On August 1, the convoy was located in the Bering Strait. In early August, German air reconnaissance spotted a large caravan coming from Arkhangelsk in an easterly direction. Sheer was ordered to intercept both of these oncoming convoys and try to destroy the maximum number of ships, bombard the base of the Northern Sea Route on Dikson Island and disorganize the entire system of allied shipping in the Arctic in the same way that the battleship operated in the Atlantic.

This operation, code-named Bunderland, was at its core an adventure. Going to the deep rear of the Soviet Northern Fleet, not knowing the conditions for navigation in the ice situation in the operational area, was extremely dangerous, not to mention all the surprises of a purely military nature, the ship could fall into an ice trap from which it would be impossible to get out, which threatened it inevitable death. There was also no need to count on any help in the Arctic Ocean, a thousand miles from the base.

The Northern Sea Route, which was considered the internal communications of the USSR, was shrouded in mystery for any foreign navigators for years. All data on weather conditions and ice conditions on this three thousand-mile route along the Arctic coast of the USSR were considered top secret. They would have remained so if Comrade Stalin, in the era of his "indestructible friendship" with Hitler, had not been so kind and stupid that in August 1940 he allowed the German auxiliary cruiser Komet, heading to the Pacific and Indian Oceans to destroy English maritime trade. Captain First Rank Robert Eissen, one of the most experienced hydrographers of the German fleet, an excellent sailor who received a special task to carry out hydrographic reconnaissance of the Northern Sea Route, was appointed commander of the Comet, which he did with the help of three successive Soviet icebreakers with very characteristic names.

"Lenin", "Stalin" and "Kaganovich", which for two weeks led the German raider from Kolguev Island to the Bering Strait.

The materials collected by Eissen were transferred to the Scheer, and therefore the captain of the first rank Meendsen-Bolken, hoping that the weather, controlled by God's Providence, in specific months of any year corresponds to age-old stamps, decided to start the operation exactly the same day with that the date when the legendary "Komet" moved along the Northern Sea Route after the icebreaker "Lenin" - exactly two years ago. That is, August 18th.

The only difference was that the Comet went through the Matochkin Shar Strait, while the Sheer needed to go around Novaya Zemlya from the north. In addition, unlike the Comet,

the battleship was supposed to start the operation not from Kolguev Island, but leaving Narvik. Therefore, Meendsen-Bohlken had to start two days earlier.

On August 16, at five o'clock in the morning, the Admiral Scheer left Narvik. On board the raider was, as usual, a radio intelligence group led by a captain of the second rank Disterg.

For about a day, Scheer was escorted by three destroyers: Ekkolt, Beitsin and Steinbrig. Then they turned back, and the raider went to the site of a secret rendezvous with two submarines - U-601 (Lieutenant Commander Grau) and U-251 (Lieutenant Commander Timm). A thick fog hung over the Barents Sea, the ice conditions were favorable.

In the fog, we almost ran into a transport, apparently Soviet, going on a collision course. Warned by a submarine, the Sheer managed to evade the meeting and on August 19, rounding Cape Zhelaniya (the northern tip of Novaya Zemlya), entered the Kara Sea. Submarines headed south to monitor the Matochkin Shar Strait in order to inform Sheer about caravans going east.

Entering the Kara Sea, Meendsen-Bolken remembered the saying that "only a fool can trust in the Providence of God." In front of him lay the diary of the commander of the Comet, two years old, where the captain of the first rank Eissen wrote: "It was a delightful journey through the Vilkitsky Strait under a blue sky, a pale moon and a midnight sun. Everything was there, except for the ice."

Unlike Eissen, who passed here two years ago, the captain of the first rank Meendsen-Bolken saw nothing but ice. Ice fields surrounded the Sheer from all sides.

For more than a day, the Sheer zigzagged around Solitude Island, trying to break through the ice fields. This was especially disappointing because U-251, which had gone south, reported a large convoy - of about twenty ships - heading east, apparently from Arkhangelsk.

From the Sheer, the Arado airborne aircraft was catapulted into the air for ice reconnaissance. It was necessary to break through as quickly as possible to the Nordenskiöld archipelago, past which the high road of the Arctic convoys passed. Judging by radio interception, the convoy coming from the Far East has already managed to slip through the Vilkitsky Strait. But on the approach to the strait there was another convoy coming from Arkhangelsk.

The Arado found a passage in the ice fields, and the Scheer eventually managed to reach the archipelago, but then solid ice fields again blocked its path, behind which the convoy transports were somewhere close.

On August 25, at 05:30, the Arado seaplane was again sent to ice reconnaissance. The raider was maneuvering at low speed in the area of Russky Island. Neither the intelligence of the Allies, nor the intelligence of the Soviet Northern Fleet, into whose deep rear such a large surface ship as the Sheer had broken through, had yet known about its appearance in the Kara Sea. The incident itself is unprecedented in naval history.

Returning "Arado" reported that he had found a way out of another ice "mousetrap". However, when landing on the water in fog, the seaplane received such severe damage that it was no longer possible to use it.

Having set a course for the exit, the Scheer continued to carefully descend to the southeast, hoping to intercept the convoy in the Vilkitsky Strait, although he did not know the ice situation in the Meendsen-Bolken Strait, and no longer dared to rely on Eissen's memories.

At noon, signalmen reported to the battleship commander about the discovery of the tops of two masts on the horizon. The masts slowly rose above the icy surface, transforming into a small vessel of about 3,000 tons. It was the Soviet icebreaking steamer "Alexander Sibiryakov".

Built in 1909 in England for Canada, it was originally named "Bellaventure". In 1916, the ship was bought by Russia and renamed "Alexander Sibiryakov" in honor of a major entrepreneur and financier who invested a lot of money in the development of Russian Siberia and the extreme regions of the North. Actually, the ship was bought with his money. Although Alexander Sibiryakov himself fled abroad from the horrors of Bolshevism, the ship was never renamed, because for some reason many considered Sibiryakov one of the associates of Semyon Dezhnev, the discoverer of Siberia in the 17th century.

In 1932, "Alexander Sibiryakov" became famous throughout the country, having managed to pass the entire Northern Sea Route in one navigation, and was awarded the Order of the Red Banner. With the outbreak of war, the Sibiryakov was mobilized and included in the White Sea military flotilla of the Northern Fleet, but in May 1942 it was handed over to the Main Directorate of the Northern Sea Route under a civilian flag. Nevertheless, the ship was armed no worse than the auxiliary cruiser. Two 76 mm guns were mounted on its stern, and two 45 mm guns were mounted on its bow. On the superstructure, four anti-aircraft machine guns menacingly looked into the sky. The ship was commanded by Senior Lieutenant Kacharava, and the crew consisted of military and civilian sailors.

On the "Sibiryakov" they saw the approaching "Sheer" almost at the same moment when the signalers of the "Sheer" saw them. But even graduates of the Naval Academy were not able to identify enemy ships in the Soviet fleet. Therefore, it is not surprising that from the bridge of the Sibiryakov, they looked with surprise at a huge warship that appeared out of nowhere in the very heart of the Arctic. This has never happened before in the entire recorded history of polar navigation.

The American flag was raised on the Sheer and the signal: "Report the ice situation in the Vilkitsky Strait."

From the "Sibiryakov" they requested the name of the warship.

"Tuscaloosa," replied the Sheer ("Tuscaloosa" is one of the American heavy cruisers). The secret appearance of an American heavy cruiser in the center of the Arctic was absolutely unbelievable, and correctly suspecting that the enemy was in front of them, the Sibiryakov abruptly changed course, trying to hide in the strait behind Belukha Island.

"Immediately stop and stop the operation of the ship's radio station," the Sheer ordered, "inform the ice situation in the Vilkitsky Strait!"

"The warship is heading straight for us," radioed the "Sibiryakov" to the headquarters of the Northern Sea Route on Dixon Island.

No one understood anything on Dixon either. Of course, nothing was heard about any American cruiser in the Directorate of the Northern Sea Route.

Meanwhile, the heavy cruiser Tuscaloosa with three American and one British destroyers was at Vaenga at that time.

The Sheer turned its nose to the Sibiryakov, not wanting to be identified for the time being. His powerful radio station began to fill the Sibiryakov wave, and the searchlight flashed the order again: "Stop!" And since "Sibiryakov" did not obey, at 12:02 "Sheer" fired a warning shot under his nose.

It is not known what was happening on the bridge of the Sibiryakov at that moment, but on Dikson they received the last radiogram from him with the following content:

"I see an enemy auxiliary cruiser!"

More contact with "Sibiryakov" failed, for some time he was considered missing without lead.

But the appearance of a German auxiliary cruiser in the immediate vicinity of the Vilkitsky Strait was an emergency on a huge scale.

"Everyone, everyone, everyone! - the radio station of Dikson Island announced the alarm. - A fascist auxiliary cruiser has appeared in the Kara Sea!

At this time, a caravan of fourteen large transports was already heading along the Vilkitsky Strait, which led directly to the Sheer.

Between the "Sheer" and the caravan was only the icebreaking steamer "Sibiryakov".

It is possible that the Sibiryakov really mistook the Admiral Scheer for an auxiliary cruiser. The distance between the ships was at least twelve thousand meters. It is also possible that when the Sheer fired a warning shot, the Sibiryakov realized that the enemy was in front of them when they remembered the numerous warnings of the Northern Fleet command that enemy submarines and auxiliary cruisers should be wary of in the Kara Sea. At the same time, no fantasy could imagine that a battleship would come into these waters, even if it was a pocket one.

And since the "Sibiryakov" itself was actually an auxiliary cruiser, the valiant senior lieutenant Kacharava, without hesitation, ordered to return fire from all the guns, and his radio station, like a battle horn, sounded the alarm in all the bays, ports, stations and bases of the Arctic.

Later it turned out that none of these Sibiryakov's radio messages had been received, but the retransmission of his last radio message from Dikson was received by a caravan going through the Vilkitsky Strait. The transports were ordered to go into the ice. It took about an hour, and no one knew whether fate would let them go this hour or not ...

With the second volley, "Sheer" achieved a hit in "Sibiryakov". Gasoline tanks stacked on the deck of the icebreaker exploded, the ship was engulfed in flames, but it continued to fire from all guns, causing admiration on the pocket battleship.

The shells of the Sibiryakov's guns fell with a large undershoot, but Meendsen-Bolken ordered everyone to leave the upper deck of the ship.

"Sibiryakov" continued to fire, skillfully using fog buoys instead of smoke veils.

The sailors of the Sibiryakov repeated the feat of the English auxiliary cruiser Jervis Bay, which, having entered into battle with the Sheer, made it possible for the convoy guarded by it to disperse in the ocean. But, if the Jervis Bay held out against the Sheer for twenty-two minutes, then the Alexander Sibiryakov fought with a pocket battleship for more than an hour before sinking to the bottom on an even keel.

This hour was enough for the ships of the caravan to go into the ice, where the Sheer could no longer reach them.

Having lifted on board the surviving members of the Sibiryakov crew (seventy-nine

Russian sailors), including commander Kacharava, the Sheer tried to break into the Vilkitsky Strait and intercept the caravan of transports.

At this time, the weather changed, a thick fog descended, the wind changed, and the ice through which the Admiral Scheer moved began to thicken menacingly, squeezing the sides of the ship.

There was no more airborne aircraft on the Sheer - they didn't even raise it after an emergency landing on the water, but finished it off with fire from one of the anti-aircraft guns. The ship has lost their "eyes".

Meanwhile, due to fog, for almost two days, the Sheer navigators were unable to make accurate astronomical determinations - ice, wind and currents carried the ship off course.

By attacking the Sibiryakov, Meendsen-Bolken hoped to get hold of secret maps of the ice situation.

This was not possible, but he now had eighteen prisoners at his disposal, the interrogation of which somewhat clarified the situation.

Realizing that he could no longer reach the caravan of ships coming from Arkhangelsk, the captain of the first rank Meendsen-Bolken decided to attack Dikson Island, bombard it, destroy the ships in the port, coastal facilities and headquarters. Under favorable conditions, he hoped to land troops on the island, which would complete the defeat of this important Soviet Arctic base.

Having found out with the help of the prisoners the best ways to approach the island through the ice, the Sheer approached Dixon on the night of August 27.

On the approach to the island from one of the ice floes, right in front of the nose of the Sheer, a large polar bear jumped into the hole and swam to another ice floe. Meendsen-Bolken, a great animal lover, stopped the ship, allowing the bear to safely reach the ice floe.

Approaching the island for about ten thousand meters, "Sheer" opened fire from the main caliber guns on the village and port.

Return fire was fired by a six-inch coastal battery located on the island and guns from the armed steamships Dezhnev and Revolutionary, which were in the port. However, their fire was very poorly controlled, and hits on the Sheer were not achieved. By the way the Sheer bombarded, it became clear that the raider more or less accurately (apparently from prisoners of war) knew the location of the main important objects on the island and in the port.

The ship resumed the bombardment seven times, at times going to sea and putting up a smoke screen from the fire of coastal batteries, firing only seventy-seven shells of the main caliber at the island. He managed to sink a tanker in the port and blow up a barge with ammunition. "Dezhnev" and "Revolutionary" were heavily damaged.

If coastal batteries and armed steamships entered into a valiant battle with a pocket battleship, then open panic reigned at the headquarters on Dixon.

They burned secret ciphers and documents. Everyone was sure of the inevitability of the landing and, under the explosions of heavy shells, they fled into the tundra - deep into the island.

Warehouses with coal, tanks with fuel oil and diesel fuel burned. Bypassing the island, moving to the northeast, "Sheer" continued the bombardment. He managed to destroy the transmitting antenna and severely damage the building of the New Dixon radio station, destroy the building of the Naval Operations Headquarters and the Northern Sea Route Administration.

However, this time the pocket battleship was accurately identified, and Dixon's radio station managed to transmit a message about this, which reached the Headquarters of the Northern Fleet in Polyarny. The information received sent the fleet headquarters into a daze. The Northern Fleet did not have any combat weapons capable of intercepting the Sheer and destroying it. The main forces of the allies were at that moment in the region of Iceland.

However, Meendsen-Bolken did not dare to land on Dixon. The presence of a six-inch coastal battery on the island indicated that there was a fairly strong garrison on Dixon, which had already shown an intention to fight.

In addition, an unexpected change in the strength and direction of the wind led the Sheer commander to the idea that the advancing ice could cut off his retreat from the island.

Meendsen-Bolken was going to bombard Amderma as well, but on the evening of August 27 he received an order from the commander of the German fleet in Norway, Admiral Schmundt, to return to the base.

The return journey of the Admiral Scheer also passed without any interference, and on August 28 at 19:37, three destroyers of the fifth flotilla met a pocket battleship near Bear Island and entered into its guard.

On August 30, around noon, the Admiral Scheer returned to base, entering Tjelsund. The Sheer's raid on Dixon Island made a stunning impression and was of great importance.

The main task of any raider against enemy shipping is not to sink a large number of ships during the operation - this is a secondary indicator - but to introduce disorganization into the enemy's maritime transportation system, forcing him to divert large forces to protect transport convoys, change their routes, and declare various areas forbidden swimming and much more.

This is exactly what Scheer managed to do in the Atlantic, and the same was done in the Soviet Arctic. The Soviet command for the first time realized how vulnerable the Arctic sea routes were to penetration into the heart of the Arctic by large enemy warships, and for a long time the slender silhouette of the Sheer still seemed to be in these latitudes, although the Germans no longer had any opportunity to repeat such operations ...

In September-October 1942, the Scheer remained in Norway, changing places of parking, and on November 6, 1942, left Norwegian waters and, accompanied by five destroyers of the 8th flotilla, headed for Wilhelmshafen, where in December 1942 stood up for a major overhaul.

After the repair was completed, the Admiral Scheer was transferred to the Baltic Sea, where during 1943 and the beginning of 1944, based alternately on Gotengafen and Swinemünde, he was part of a detachment of training ships.

As the Soviet Army advanced along the Baltic coast, the large German ships remaining in service were transferred to the Baltic, supporting the coastal flank of the army with their fire, helping to evacuate the coastal garrisons and refugees.

In October 1944, the Admiral Scheer was included in the Baltic Sea Task Force, commanded by the former commander of the Atlantis, Rogge, who by that time had already become a vice admiral with a flag on the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen.

On November 18, 1944, the Admiral Scheer approached the island of Svorbe (the Moonsund Archipelago) in order to stop the advance of the Red Army with the fire of its heavy guns and facilitate the evacuation of the garrisons of the islands.

As soon as the "Admiral Scheer" appeared at the island, more than thirty Soviet torpedo bombers and bombers attacked it from three directions at once. According to one eyewitness, "The Admiral Scheer began the battle like a huge wild boar fighting off a pack of hunting dogs. An incredible, amazing dance began. The torpedoes, clearly visible on the trail, each time passed by the ship, which described the circulations at high speed, and bombs exploded around ... "

Until November 24, the Sheer covered the evacuation of Svorbe with fire, fighting off Soviet air raids. Having shot almost all the ammunition, the Scheer was replaced by the Lutzow and withdrew to load the shells.

In December 1944, the Admiral Scheer and Lutzow covered the evacuation of the Memel garrison with the fire of the main caliber guns.

Volleys of heavy guns from pocket battleships, of course, could no longer affect the outcome of the war, but, greatly slowing down the offensive of the Soviet troops, ensured the evacuation of refugees, wounded and hopelessly surrounded troops from the defended bridgeheads. Thanks to them, over two million people were transported by sea, which is an example of the most successful evacuation by sea in modern history ...

In January 1945, the Sheer operated at Pillau, where a huge number of troops and refugees had accumulated, hoping to be evacuated by sea to the saving west. The small seaside town could not accommodate all the people gathered in it. Terrible scenes played out on city streets and wharfs. Soviet troops surrounded Pillau from three sides, cutting off land communications with Koenigsberg. "Admiral Scheer" and "Luttsov" brought down tons of 280-mm shells on Soviet positions.

On February 9 and 10, 1945, the Admiral Scheer, with its fire, forced part of the thirty-ninth Soviet army to retreat from their positions. As a result, land communications with Koenigsberg were restored, where the troops that escaped from the encirclement and hundreds of thousands of refugees rushed.

From the bridge of the Scheer, through rangefinders, endless crowds of people, livestock and lines of wagons were visible, wandering along the ice of the bay that separates Pillau from Konigsberg. Russian artillery fired sporadic fire on them, not wanting to reveal their positions. The Sheer began to have problems resupplying ammunition and fuel, but when they were able to replenish them, the Sheer's guns again rained down fire on the Soviet batteries and tank clusters, throwing them away from the city.

During February 1945, the Admiral Scheer destroyed the Soviet "bags" near Elbing, Tolkemit and Fraueburg, allowing the encircled garrisons to withdraw further and further west.

The Scheer's guns, in order to reach the Russian positions, had to fire at a distance of about twenty-two miles, which was the limit of their range of fire. As a result, the barrels of the guns were so worn out that they needed urgent replacement. The ship was sent to Kiel to change artillery.

On the way, the Admiral Scheer arrived in Gottenhafen, from where she left on March 8, escorted by two destroyers, taking on board eight hundred refugees and two hundred wounded. On the way to Kiel from the Sheer, between Kolberg and Divenov, they saw a large concentration of refugees trying to cross the coastal ice under the fire of Soviet artillery. Despite the large number of passengers on board, the Sheer opened fire and silenced the enemy artillery with three volleys.

Arriving in Kiel, the ship stood up to the wall of the Germania plant to change guns. Work went on

slowly, because the city and the naval base were bombed day and night by Anglo-American aircraft. But the Scheer, justifying its nickname of the "happy ship", remained safe and sound for a whole month.

This continued until April 9, 1945. On this fateful day, at 21:33, the first wave of British bombers appeared over Kiel. Having intelligence about being at the Sheer plant, the British bombarded the plant and its water area for twenty minutes. It seemed that luck would accompany Scheer endlessly - he did not receive a single direct hit.

At 22:00, a second wave of British bombers began to operate over the city. After 8 minutes, another flight of bombers appeared over the water area of the plant. A series of five heavy bombs fell into the water at the very starboard side of the Sheer, exploding in the water and breaking through the skin along almost the entire underwater part of the starboard side of the ship with hydraulic shocks. "Admiral Scheer" began to list heavily to starboard, and an hour after the start of the attack, he turned over, burying his superstructure in the sandy bottom of the factory pool. Only part of the port side and propellers remained above the water. Thirty-two people died. Most of the crew managed to get to the wall. During the night, the workers, having cut holes in the bottom of the lost ship, saved fourteen more people, including the commander - captain of the first rank Tineman.

After the war, a legend arose that during the reconstruction of the plant, the overturned Sheer was covered with rubble and concreted in a new pier, becoming the only warship in the world buried on land. This is not entirely true. Dismantling of the ship began in July 1945. The main turrets, all auxiliary and anti-aircraft artillery, propellers, armor plates and parts made of non-ferrous metals were removed from the Sheer.

By 1950, only the frame of the ship's hull remained, which was indeed covered with rubble and concreted.

Today, above the building of the "Admiral Scheer" there is a parking lot for workers and employees of the current Naval Arsenal in Kiel.

What was the fate of one of the most famous commanders of the "Admiral Scheer" - captain of the first rank Theodor Kranke?

April 1, 1941 - on the day the ship returned from a long Atlantic raid to Germany, he was promoted to rear admiral.

In June 1941, Kranke took over as head of the Quartermaster Directorate of the Main Naval Staff and communications officer at Hitler's headquarters.

On April 1, 1942, Kranke became vice admiral, and on March 1, 1943 he was promoted to admiral and appointed commander of the West naval group.

In April 1945, Kranke was appointed commander of the German fleet in Norway, where he surrendered to the British. Admiral Kranke was in captivity for two years, during which the British investigators checked his activities, trying to see signs of war crimes in these activities. In 1947, Kranke was released from captivity. He died on June 18, 1973 at the age of eighty in Wentorf, a suburb of Hamburg.

The polar commander of the Scheer, captain of the first rank Wilhelm Meendsen-Bolken, commanded the ship until November 1942.

On February 1, 1943, Meendsen-Bolken was promoted to rear admiral and appointed commander of the German naval forces in Tunisia, and then in Italy.

For the raid "Admiral Scheer" to the island of Dixon, he was awarded the Knight's Cross.

In July 1944, Meendsen-Bolken was promoted to vice admiral and until May 1945 was the last commander of the surface forces of the Kriegsmarine. In captivity, Meendsen-Bolken had trouble because of the testimony he received that his sailors fired at the Sibiriyakov's boats. But nothing has been proven.

APPLICATION

Tactical and technical data of the pocket battleship "ADMIRAL SCHEER"

Displacement: 15,900 tons (full).

Main dimensions: 186 x 20.7 x 7.25m.

Maximum speed: 28 knots (three-shaft diesel power plant, 54,000 hp).

Armament: Six 280-mm (11") / 54 guns located in two triple-gun turrets on extremities.

Eight 150-mm / 55 guns in single-barrel gun mounts on the upper deck.

Six 105-mm/65 anti-aircraft guns in double-barreled gun mounts.

Eight 37-mm double-barreled anti-aircraft guns.

Six 20mm anti-aircraft guns.

Eight 533 mm surface torpedo tubes.

Catapult, two Arado aircraft.

Booking:

Boards - 80 mm.

Decks - 45 mm.

Towers - 150 mm.

Conning tower - 150 mm.

Cruising range: 9100 nautical miles at a speed of 20 knots.

Crew: 615 - 1150 people.

Type: "Deutschland".

Admiral Scheer (1863 - 1928), after whom the ship is named - commander of the German High Seas Fleet from 1916 to 1918. Brief historical background of the actions of the pocket battleship "Admiral Scheer" before the start of World War II.

The battleship (pocket battleship) Admiral Scheer was laid down on June 25, 1931 at the Navy shipyard in Wilhelmshafen.

The ship was launched on April 1, 1933. Godmother - daughter of Admiral Scheer

Marianne Besserer.

November 12, 1934 "Admiral Scheer", manned by a crew from the battleship "Hessen", was commissioned.

On April 18, 1935, having completed all the tests, the ship was included in the line forces of the German Navy.

From August 30 to September 1, 1935, the Admiral Scheer paid a visit to Danzig.

October 19, 1935 "Admiral Scheer" went to the Atlantic voyage. The ship visited Funchal on the island of Madeira and returned to Kiel on November 9, 1935.

On June 6, 1936, Admiral Foerster, commander of the fleet, raised the flag on the Admiral Scheer.

From 6 to 19 June, together with the pocket battleship Deutschland, the Admiral Scheer made a trip across the English Channel to the Irish Sea, after which, rounding Cape Skagen, he returned to Kiel.

From June 23 to 29, 1936, the Scheer under the flag of Admiral Foerster visited Stockholm, where King Gustav V of Sweden visited it. After returning to Kiel, Admiral Foerster transferred the flag to the pocket battleship Admiral Graf Spee.

On July 24, 1936, the battleships Admiral Scheer and Deutschland (the flag of Rear Admiral Karls) entered Spanish waters to protect German citizens and property in connection with the civil war that began on July 17 in Spain.

On August 31, 1936, the Admiral Scheer returned to Kiel, conducted exercises in the North Sea, and on October 2 left Wilhelmshaven, again heading for Spanish waters.

On December 3, 1936, the ship returned to Kiel for repairs, after which, on March 15, 1937, she again went to Spain, where she stayed until April 7, 1937.

May 9, 1937 "Admiral Scheer" went on his fourth trip to the Spanish coast.

On May 29, 1937, the plane of the "red" Spaniards attacked the flagship of the Deutschland detachment near Ibiza, achieving a direct hit by an air bomb on the battleship. Having received a message about this, the Admiral Scheer immediately headed for Ibiza, and the damaged Deutschland withdrew to Gibraltar.

The commander of the battleship Admiral Scheer, captain of the first rank Tsiliaks, as a retribution, launched a powerful artillery strike on the port of Almeria. The actions of the pocket battleship were supported by four destroyers of the second flotilla.

On June 10, 1936, Rear Admiral Fischel, commander of the detachment, raised the flag on the Admiral Scheer.

June 23 "Admiral Scheer" was relieved off the Spanish coast by the cruiser "Nuremberg" and returned on July 1, 1937 to Wilhelmshafen.

After a short stay at home, "Admiral Scheer" July 30, 1937 went on his fifth campaign in Spanish waters under the flag of Admiral Karls. The ship stayed off the coast of Spain until October 8, 1937, after which it was replaced by Deutschland and returned on October 11 to Wilhelmshafen, where it was repaired.

After conducting exercises in the Baltic Sea in January 1938, the Admiral Scheer on February 12, 1938

of the year for the sixth time went to Spain, where on February 16 Rear Admiral Fishel raised the flag on it.

March 14 "Admiral Scheer" was relieved by the cruiser "Emden" and returned to Kiel, where Rear Admiral Fishel left the ship, transferring command of the detachment to the commander of the "Scheer".

On March 19, the ship left for Spain for the seventh time, where it stayed until June 26.

June 29, 1938 "Admiral Scheer" returned to Wilhelmshafen, completing its activities off the coast of Spain.

In July 1938, the Admiral Scheer carried out torpedo firing in the Baltic Sea, and on August 22 took part in a large parade on the occasion of the launching of the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen in Kiel in the presence of Hitler and Admiral Horthy.

In February 1939, the Admiral Scheer was in Hamburg, saluting the descent from the stocks of the battleship Bismarck, and in March, as the flagship of Vice Admiral Marshall, he took part in the occupation of the Memel region.

April 18, 1939 "Admiral Scheer" went to the Atlantic voyage, visiting Lisbon, returned May 3, 1939 to Wilhelmshafen.

Already on September 4, 1939, at the Schilling raid, the Admiral Scheer was subjected to the first British air raid, having received minor damage from close bomb explosions. The battleship's anti-aircraft gunners shot down three enemy Bristol-Blenheim-class bombers.

In February 1940, the ship was modernized in Wilhelmshaven. The bow superstructure was rebuilt and the stem configuration was changed - "Atlantic bow". "Admiral Scheer" was reclassified as a heavy cruiser. The commanders of the pocket battleship "Admiral Scheer":

Captain First Rank Marshall - November 1934 - September 1936

Captain First Rank Ciliac - September 1936 - October 1938

Captain First Rank Wurmbach - October 1938 - October 1939

Captain First Rank Kranke - October 1939 - June 1941

Captain First Rank Meendsen-Bolken June 1941-November 1942

Second rank captain Gruber (acting) November 1942-January 1943

Captain First Rank Rote-Rof - February 1943-April 1944

Captain First Rank Tineman - April 1944 - April 10, 1945

4. OPERATION "EASTERN FRONT". THE LAST RID OF SCHARNHORST

Real sailors always perceive the ship as a living being with its own habits and character. These habits are called the soul of the ship. Ships are gloomy and often even evil, but they are good-natured and cheerful.

The battleship Scharnhorst definitely had a soul, and a cheerful one at that. And the ship conveyed this cheerful spirit to its crew, to everyone - from the commander to the last cleaning sailor.

The beginning of the war caught the Scharnhorst on trials after a long stay in the dock.

The battleship was laid down on May 16, 1935 in Wilhelmshaven, launched on October 3, 1936, and entered service on January 7, 1939.

Its first commander was the captain of the first rank Tsiliaks.

However, Scharnhorst was not ready for military service. Its crew was recruited directly from the training detachments, the sailors had no sea experience.

In addition, experimental boilers with high steam output, as well as many other new battleship equipment, needed long-term testing. But the war began and the time allotted for testing had to be drastically reduced. Moreover, the commander of the ship went on sick leave and was replaced by the captain of the first rank Hoffman.

The First World War taught us to consider battleships as "fierce dogs, constantly sitting on a chain", that is, constantly standing in bases and not taking part in hostilities. Everyone hoped that the new war would be different. So far, only the anti-aircraft guns of the battleships were working, repulsing the daily air raids of the British, giving at least the opportunity to test new air defense systems.

In early September 1939, having waited for the completion of work on deepening the Kaiser Wilhelm Canal, the Scharnhorst, becoming the first of the new large-tonnage ships that passed through the canal, moved to Kiel. There, a secret radar equipment was installed on the battleship, known at that time as "Dete", or "E. M.-2", superior in its characteristics to similar systems of the British.

In early November, the Scharnhorst returned to Wilhelmshafen, where its sister battleship Gneisenau was stationed. On November 21, both battleships began to descend down the Jade River, heading for the open sea. On the Gneisenau, the flag of the commander of the fleet, Vice Admiral Marshall, was raised.

On the Scharnhorst, Captain 1st Rank Hoffmann addressed the crew via the ship's broadcast and announced that the aim of the operation was to attack enemy guard forces patrolling between Iceland and the Faroe Islands. The officers and sailors of the Scharnhorst were extremely surprised - none of the battleships of the High Seas Fleet dared to conduct operations at such a distance from the base during the First World War.

But the surprise came to an end when the ships, accompanied by destroyers, put to sea. At first, the formation went on a northern course, bypassing the so-called Western Barrier - vast minefields set up by the British to protect the North Frisian Islands. Ahead of the battleships, destroyers marched in a curtain formation, conducting anti-submarine surveillance. Huge radar antennas spun silently. On November 22, at about two in the morning, the minefield was left behind the stern and the destroyers were released. In complete darkness, without lights, the battleships increased their speed to twenty-eight knots, striving under the cover of night

slip through the narrow strip of sea between the Shetland Islands and the coast of Norway.

Soon the weather began to deteriorate. A southwest wind of seven to eight points, which overtook a large wave, ruthlessly rocked the huge ships, forcing the inexperienced crew to suffer from bouts of seasickness.

Giant masses of water, falling on the battleships, caused a lot of minor damage to the ship economy. In such harsh conditions, a real contact was established between the crew and the ship.

Changing course to the northwest, during the night of November 22-23, the formation left the Faroe Islands astern, passing them at a distance of thirty miles, and headed for Iceland.

The next day visibility was excellent, but no one could be seen. Both German battleships actually sailed through the internal waters of the British Home Fleet, at the risk of being discovered by British ships or aircraft, but this also did not happen.

Finally, at 16:07, signalmen from the upper tier of the superstructure reported to the bridge: "There is a large steamer to the right of the course. It's very far away, as if nothing can be made out yet."

The captain of the first rank Hoffman went up to the signalmen to find out for himself: is this a merchant ship or an auxiliary cruiser?

Soon the commander reported to the bridge by phone: "It periodically changes course and does not carry any flag."

Hoffmann gave the order to approach the ship. About half an hour later the combat alarm was broken and the commander went down to the bridge.

From the Scharnhorst they reported to the admiral on the Gneisenau about the appearance of an unknown steamer, which the Scharnhorst ordered to stop.

Since the ship did not obey, the Scharnhorst opened fire, hitting the target with the very first shells.

To everyone's surprise, the steamer defiantly returned fire, then covered herself with a smoke screen and tried to get away. When the Gneisenau approached the battlefield from the south, the steamer was already completely engulfed in flames, resembling a huge torch burning right on the surface of the sea. But his radio station continued to work, calling for help.

The burning steamer lowered the boats. The Scharnhorst slowed down, allowing the lifeboats to come aboard to take in the survivors. However, a signal from the Gneisenau unexpectedly followed:

"Abort the rescue operation immediately. Follow me!"

At the same moment, from one of the signal posts they reported:

"Directly on the stern of the enemy!"

Instantly assessing the situation, Hoffmann turned the handles of the machine telegraph to "full speed ahead." Both battleships began to move east at full speed. The English cruiser Newcastle, which appeared behind the stern, tried to pursue them, but quickly fell behind. Survivors from the sunken steamer were lifted onto the cruiser, which turned out to be the auxiliary cruiser Rawalpindi, a former passenger liner with a displacement of 16,000 tons. Its commander, Captain First Rank Kennedy, was not afraid to engage in battle with two battleships.

the enemy and bring the main forces of his fleet to them.

The British Home Fleet attempted to intercept the German battleships on their return to base, but to no avail. Forecasters on the Scharnhorst predicted poor visibility and a storm approaching from the south off the coast of Norway. For two days, both battleships waited for favorable conditions for the return. After waiting for the barometer to drop sharply, the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau headed south into the storm. During the night of 25/26 November they sailed at twenty-seven knots towards Cape Stadlandet. The storm was gathering strength, the waves rolled over the deck, the spray reached the upper tier of the bow superstructure, which seemed to be sticking out of the water. It seemed that both battleships were submerged. During the day, control was carried out from the conning tower, since the command bridges were practically under water. Finally, on November 27, the operation was successfully completed.

The results of the battleship raids showed that with their high speed and great autonomy (the tanks of the ships could hold up to six thousand tons of fuel), the raiders are an excellent means of attacking British shipping. In January 1940, both battleships conducted exercises in the Baltic, where there was a severe winter with unprecedented frosts. The ships stood in Kiel, frozen in the ice, and the sailors released to the city reached the berths on foot on the ice. In March, the icebreaker broke the ice around the battleships, and they were ordered to return to the North Sea to perform new combat missions.

However, no new tasks were set, and the battleships in the base, like the army behind the Siegfried Line, waited in inaction for the end of the period of the "strange war". A short but fruitless trip to Stavanger brought some variety to the monotonous ship life. It was getting warmer, the intensity of the British air raids increased, in the daytime, air raid signals were constantly sounded on the ships, anti-aircraft guns rumbled.

Various rumors circulated around the base, although nothing was known for sure, but many felt that some important operation was waiting for them ahead. And they weren't wrong. Indeed, the operational order under the code name "Weser Teachings" was already in the commander's safe.

"Teaching Weser" was the code name for the occupation of Norway and Denmark. This, to put it mildly, a daring undertaking was entrusted to the fleet and could only be successfully carried out while maintaining complete secrecy.

On April 6, when the Scharnhorst cut off all communications with the shore, the fleet commander arrived on board the battleship and informed the crew of the upcoming operation.

On the night of the sixth to the seventh of April, the ships put to sea. The formation consisted of the battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, which were joined at Wangerooge by the heavy cruiser Admiral Hipper with four destroyers of her escort and a flotilla of ten destroyers, later known as the Narvik Group, which became famous off the coast of northern Norway. At the time of the uniting of the detachments, an unknown aircraft passed over them on a strafing flight. Driven away by anti-aircraft fire, he quickly disappeared into the darkness, and the ships went north at full speed. At dawn, aircraft ejected from the battleships and the heavy cruiser began loitering over the ships, and the destroyers formed into anti-submarine guards.

In the afternoon of April 7, an air raid alert was announced on all ships abeam the Skagerrak. Several formations of enemy aviation were approaching the ships. Anti-aircraft guns rumbled, and the same questions were discussed on the command bridges: is the appearance of enemy aircraft connected with the fact that the British learned about the upcoming

operations? Or did they just find German ships at sea and decide to attack them? Despite all the doubts and fears, the connection continued to go the same course. The weather was fine and everyone breathed a sigh of relief as the darkness of the long polar night enveloped the ships in an impenetrable veil. The signalmen peered into the night with redoubled voltage as the ships passed through the narrowness between Shetland and Norway.

On the morning of April 8, the weather deteriorated sharply. The fresh wind soon reached the strength of seven points. The destroyers could hardly row against the wave, forcing the heavy ships to slow down. Now from one, then from another ship, reports were received about the sighted reconnaissance aircraft of the British. Soon an important message came that the German destroyers left off the southern coast of Norway had already entered into battle with the enemy destroyers that had appeared. The heavy cruiser Admiral Hipper was ordered to reverse course and assist her destroyers to the south.

On board the Scharnhorst, Captain First Rank Hoffmann remarked to his navigator:

"I don't understand at all what the English destroyers are doing at sea. There were no reports that heavy enemy ships were in the sea?"

"No, commander," answered Captain Gissler of the third rank. "Not yet..."

The words of the navigator were interrupted by a report from the radio room.

"The British issued a mine warning off the southern coast of Norway. Obviously, they put up new minefields there."

Captain First Rank Hoffman carefully read this message delivered by the messenger to the bridge.

— What does it all mean? asked the commander of the Scharnhorst, addressing no one in particular. "It looks like the British have the same plans as we do. With actions against our fleet, they seem to be covering up an operation for their own occupation of Norway."

Meanwhile, the connection continued to go the same course.

At 21:00 on April 8, in complete darkness, the battleships approached the entrance to the Trondheim Fjord. Ten destroyers, intended to support and occupy Narvik, entered the fiord, and the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau maneuvered all night in the area of the Lafoten Islands, covering these destroyers from the rear. The sea was violently stormy, huge ships rose on the waves, sometimes disappearing from view in blinding snow charges. By dawn on April 8, the weather improved somewhat, visibility, except for occasional snowballs, was at times even excellent. For a short time, stars peeked out of the heavy clouds, and the captain of the third rank Gissler was able to pinpoint the exact location of the Scharnhorst with the help of a sextant. The navigator was still looking into the mirror of the sextant when he suddenly saw in it the flash of a cannon shot.

"Combat Alert!"

Short orders, signals from the flagship, and heavy turrets of 280mm guns turned towards the ship, projected in a hazy silhouette against the dark western sky. Firing from the stern turrets, both battleships began to move north, pursued by 15-inch shells. Several shells fell near the Scharnhorst, which was leaving, changing course with each enemy salvo.

"There is an admiral's flag on the enemy's ship," the senior artilleryman reported. "This is Rinaun!"

Fortunately, the British ship could not compete in speed with the latest German battleships and soon fell behind, disappearing into a snowstorm. The Scharnhorst was lucky enough not to receive any damage.

The connection continued north for several hours, and then turned west, almost reaching the longitude of the lonely rocky island of Jan Mayen.

On the battleships, radio operators carefully listened to the broadcast. Reports of the entire British Home Fleet going to sea were replaced by reports of fierce fighting on land and in the air. The battleships themselves, in order not to betray their place, observed complete radio silence and could not report to the command about the battle with the Rinaun. Therefore, on April 10, with the first rays of dawn, a plane was ejected from the Scharnhorst to deliver a radiogram from Admiral Marshall to Trondheim to transfer it from there to the command of the Kriegsmarine in Germany.

The Arado-196 carrier-based seaplane, piloted by Lieutenant Shrek, could barely make it to Trondheim even with full tanks. The pilot only had a map of the Trondheim Fjord and nothing else. He was supposed to reach the fiord and send a message to the Admiral Hipper. Hours passed languidly until the Admiral Hipper reported that the plane from the Scharnhorst had landed safely.

The sailors of the Scharnhorst later learned what amazement the commander of the Admiral Hipper, captain of the first rank Heye, came to when Lieutenant Shrek and his observer Lieutenant Shreve climbed onto the deck of his cruiser.

- What's happened? Heye asked anxiously. "I have just learned from the interception of an English report that the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau have been sunk!"

It was planned that on the way back the battleships would connect with the destroyers of the Narvik Group for a joint journey to the base, but all ten destroyers were lost. Now, a lack of fuel forced the battleships to return to Germany, from which came the warning that among the British ships at sea was the aircraft carrier Furious, whose aircraft almost certainly see their main task as striking at German battleships. Therefore, the admiral decided to go even further west, wait until night and only under cover of darkness turn south. Once again, the bad weather front came to the rescue of the ships. Unnoticed by the enemy, by noon they arrived at a prearranged rendezvous point with the Admiral Hipper and her destroyers. Connecting, the battleships and the Hipper again took to the air airborne aircraft to provide anti-submarine patrols. A little later, the connection was discovered by British air reconnaissance, and several waves of bombers were sent to attack the German ships, but could not detect them due to poor visibility. On April 12, the formation arrived in Wilhelmshafen.

Six weeks had to stand at the wall of the factory to repair all the damage to the artillery systems and various mechanisms before both battleships and the destroyers of their escort were again ready for battle. Meanwhile, during this time, the operational situation has fundamentally changed in favor of Germany. The campaign in France is over. The fleet received new bases in France and Norway. But the battles for Narvik continued, and their outcome was not yet clear.

On June 4, 1940, the formation, consisting of the battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, the heavy cruiser Admiral Hipper and a relatively small number of destroyers, left Kiel again under the command of Vice Admiral Marshall. Moving behind the minesweepers, the ships passed the German minefields and headed north. The situation on the command bridges was somewhat tense, as there were no accurate data

regarding the disposition of the ships of the British fleet in the Narvik area, and also because of the possibility of a strike on the formation from the side of Scapa Flow, which constantly had to be borne in mind. Submarine periscopes were detected several times, but their attacks were fairly easily evaded. Luftwaffe aircraft operating from Trondheim airfields could now conduct reconnaissance at a much greater distance.

It was fine summer weather, sometimes interrupted by short rains, which reduced visibility for a short time. During these periods, in order to avoid unpleasant surprises, one had to rely on radar data. Destroyers, replenishing fuel from battleships, constantly went along with the connection.

For the first time, the Dithmarschen universal supply tanker was sailing with warships, from which the Admiral Hipper took fuel. In the latitudes where the compound was located, it was constantly light at this time of the year. The polar night was replaced by the polar day. As in peacetime, the admiral gathered a conference of commanders aboard the flagship. He was worried about the disposition of enemy ships and the lack of information about the actions of the British fleet. Weather conditions over land made it impossible for reconnaissance aircraft to operate. Nevertheless, several small convoys were found traveling in a nearby southwesterly course.

On the morning of June 8, three heavy ships and four destroyers, lining up in front, began to comb the sea, approaching the convoys. Airborne aircraft were ejected for aerial reconnaissance.

Soon one of the German destroyers spotted an English tanker and sent it to the bottom. Other ships were found, which were also sunk by the Admiral Hipper and destroyers.

And the British hospital ship, which carried German prisoners captured in Narvik, was lucky: it was allowed to proceed to England without examination.

At noon, the Admiral Hipper and the destroyers were released to Trondheim to replenish their ammunition. The Scharnhorst and Gneisenau continued to remain at sea, holding off the northern coast of Norway. Due to the lack of complete information about the situation, Vice Admiral Marshall decided not to go to Harstad, but to operate at sea against the convoys, taking up positions between Harstad and Tromsø, maneuvering at a speed of eighteen knots.

On June 8 at 16:45 from the Scharnhorst fore-mast they reported that a smoke was seen at a long distance, which appeared for a short time above the horizon. To a clarifying question from the commander, midshipman Goss replied: "It was a short burst of smoke, as happens with poorly functioning boilers. The bearing was taken absolutely accurately.

Having reported to the admiral about what had happened, the captain of the first rank Hoffmann turned the Scharnhorst in the indicated direction. The Gneisenau repeated the Scharnhorst's maneuver, settling into its wake.

Increasing speed to twenty-seven knots, the Scharnhorst quickly closed the distance, and soon the mast rose above the horizon, then the massive chimney and superstructure, and then the chief gunner shouted excitedly:

— Commander! This is without a doubt an aircraft carrier, probably a Glories with two destroyer escorts!

From a distance of 27,000 meters, the Scharnhorst opened fire from its main battery guns. Soon the auxiliary caliber guns also opened fire, driving away the British destroyers that had rushed into the attack.

First-rank captain Hoffmann and third-rank captain Gissler watched through binoculars from the bridge as the first salvo of the Scharnhorst covered an English aircraft carrier, whose deck was so crowded with planes that none of them could take off.

- Poor things! Hoffmann sympathized with the enemy. The aircraft carrier ran into two battleships at once!

The flashes of shells on the deck of the aircraft carrier turned into a solid wall of raging flames, which, together with clouds of thick black smoke, rose high into the sky above the unfortunate ship.

Two British destroyers "Ardent" and "Acasta" tried to cover the aircraft carrier with a smoke screen and at the same time launch a torpedo attack on the German battleships. Ignoring the murderous fire from the battleships, whose shells ripped the valiant little ships to pieces, the destroyers moved in close enough to fire their torpedoes.

Both battleships kept a close eye on the torpedoes that the British destroyers managed to fire, dodging those that were spotted and detected by hydrophones.

The battle had been going on for almost two hours. The aircraft carrier Glories stood motionless, shrouded in clouds of smoke, and the destroyed destroyers continued to fight valiantly.

At 18:39, a report was received on the bridge of the Scharnhorst: "A strong explosion in the stern." Then came a stream of monotonous reports, as in a peacetime exercise: "Tower C has been evacuated", "The combat cellars of Tower C have been flooded..."

The Scharnhorst began to lose speed. There was a list to starboard, which quickly increased. Then came a report from the engine room: "Only one machine is working. From the other two, accurate reports have not yet been received. It appears to have been hit by a torpedo."

The Scharnhorst's speed dropped to twenty knots. One of the English destroyers was sunk, but the second one, which fired a torpedo into the Scharnhorst, got so close to the battleship that it fired artillery at it and even hit one of the B turret guns in the barrel. Only around 19:00 it was finally possible to sink it.

Meanwhile, on the Scharnhorst itself there was a desperate struggle for survivability. Through a huge hole fifteen meters long and six meters high, the battleship received 2,500 tons of water. In the engine room, Senior Mechanical Engineer Liebhard tried to repair damage to the center and starboard engines. The port side machine was still in operation. The stern tower of the main caliber was disabled, and forty people died in it.

On June 6, traveling at a speed of twenty knots, the formation reached Trondheim. Specialists from the floating workshop standing there, working around the clock, tried to put the Scharnhorst back into operation. After ten days of continuous work, it was possible to repair the central machine. It was a real feat accomplished by the ship's mechanics and the workers of the Huascaran floating workshop. Moreover, the work went on under almost continuous air raids from British aircraft carriers. One bomb hit the upper deck of the battleship, but, fortunately, did not explode.

Scharnhorst's own plane was engaged in driving away British submarines from the entrance to the fiord.

On June 20, with two working machines, Scharnhorst was ready to move to Germany. The right screw was fixed motionless, as there was a fear that the propeller shaft

partially destroyed by a torpedo explosion.

Pressing close to the shore, sailing at a speed of twenty-four knots, the Scharnhorst began its return to Germany. The weather was clear, visibility was excellent, but a strong headwind was blowing, knocking the destroyers off course. Due to the fact that the battleship kept close to the coast, she went south, covered from the air by fighters.

On June 21, on the beam of Sheren Island, the formation was discovered by enemy air reconnaissance, and then wave after wave for two hours, English bombers and torpedo bombers attacked the ships. Powerful anti-aircraft fire from ships and fighters repelled all attacks from the air. Many enemy bombers were shot down. Leaving tails of black smoke behind them, they fell into the sea, raising huge columns of water. Only Scharnhorst fired nine hundred 105-mm, one thousand two hundred 37-mm and two thousand four hundred 20-mm shells in this battle!

At 18:15, an order came over the radio from the headquarters of the naval group "West": "Follow to Stavanger!"

— Inconceivable! - exclaimed the captain of the first rank Hoffman, having read the order. - The anchorage in Stavanger is very cramped for us! What are they thinking about when they give orders?..

A few hours later, the ships anchored in the cramped bay of Stavanger. As it soon became clear, the headquarters of the group "West" gave this order, having learned from the intercepted radio messages that almost the entire British fleet went to sea in order to intercept the Scharnhorst.

It is good that the battleship managed to hide in Stavanger, because the next morning German air reconnaissance reported that a powerful formation of British ships, consisting of four battleships, four cruisers and several destroyers, was returning to Scapa Flow. The Scharnhorst and its guards left Stavanger at night and slipped unnoticed into Kiel, where the battleship was immediately put in for repairs.

Repair of both battleships lasted this time for almost six months. Only at the end of 1940, the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau again went to sea with the new commander of the fleet, Admiral Lutyens, intending to break through with their connection to the expanses of the Atlantic. But this time they were out of luck! Upon leaving Kiel, the battleships were met in the North Sea by such a ferocious storm that they were forced to return to their base. At the same time, Gneisenau was seriously damaged by the impact of the waves.

However, on January 22, 1941, the battleships again put to sea. The order given to Admiral Lutyens was unprecedented: for the first time in history, German ships of the line were to wage war on enemy shipping in the North Atlantic, while avoiding combat clashes with the heavy ships of the British.

The operation was carefully planned and prepared. A large number of tankers and supply ships were deployed in advance in the Atlantic to ensure that the battleships were replenished with fuel, ammunition, food and water. At that time, other German ships also operated in the Atlantic: the pocket battleship Admiral Scheer, the heavy cruiser Admiral Hipper, auxiliary cruisers and submarines. For such a weak fleet as the German one, this was a very bold undertaking.

On a moonless night on January 28, the formation tried to slip into the ocean through the Denmark Strait, but in the Rose Bushes (the so-called patrol area of the British cruisers) stumbled upon a British patrol, which, fortunately, did not notice them.

Turning on the opposite course, the battleships retreated to the north, reporting from the ejected

aircraft to the command of the naval group "North" about what had happened. Lutyens also announced his intentions to replenish fuel from the Adria tanker, which was located east of Jan Mayen Island, and then try again to break into the Atlantic, going north of Iceland at the very edge of the pack ice.

Both planned operations ended successfully, and on February 4, Admiral Lutyens signaled to his formation:

"For the first time in history, German battleships managed to break into the Atlantic. Keep it up!"

Having once again replenished their fuel supply from a tanker south of Greenland, the battleships began searching for enemy convoys. Days passed, but nothing but the waves of the desert ocean was noticed.

Finally, on February 8, masts were found on the horizon. The Scharnhorst in front, having approached the convoy, quickly became convinced that the transports were guarded by the English battleship Remillis, armed with 381-millimeter artillery. The order categorically forbade engaging in battle with enemy battleships, and both battleships withdrew, allowing the convoy to leave.

Further search was thwarted by the oncoming hurricane, and Admiral Lutyens decided to descend to the south, where, according to reports, the British had shifted the routes of some of their convoys. As we moved south, it became warmer, and the sailors gladly took off their fur jackets and woolen underwear, rejoicing in the subtropical sun.

But the hopes were in vain. The ocean was completely empty. Even on the line leading from Freetown to England, nothing could be found, except for the lone Greek steamer sunk by the Scharnhorst. Every eight days, the battleships replenished their fuel supply from tankers. Moderately hot weather continued with relatively good visibility. Airborne planes regularly took off for reconnaissance, trying in vain to find something.

Only on March 7 another convoy was discovered. This time, submarines interacted with the battleships, which were very effectively aimed by surface ships at the convoy transports. The battleships themselves were wary of coming close, since the English battleship was again guarding the convoy - this time Malaya. On the other hand, submarines destroyed several ships with a total displacement of 43,000 tons in this convoy during two nights.

After that, the operation was again decided to be moved to the north, where the shipping route between North America and Great Britain passed.

Two tankers accompanying the formation helped to conduct reconnaissance of the sea. The convoy could not be found, but single ships often began to come across. They did not stand on ceremony with them: one after another they were sent to the bottom. In less than two days, the battleships intercepted and sank 16 ships with a total displacement of 75,000 tons. It was the reward of a long fruitless search.

Commanders quickly found a method of sinking steamships without spending too much time, shooting them at the waterline. The swell of the ocean often prevented the crews of sunken steamers from the lifeboats from quickly getting on board, forcing the battleships to linger at the site of the sinking, while British warships could appear at any moment.

On March 16, this is exactly what happened.

The Scharnhorst had just sank another ship when, in the advancing darkness,

a radiogram was received from one of the tankers: "I see an enemy ship of the line!"

The Gneisenau, which was closer to the tanker, even came under fire, but the darkness that quickly set in and the downpour that began very opportunely allowed the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau to get safely lost in the ocean.

The British constantly increased the presence of their heavy ships on the ocean routes, and it soon became clear that the operation had already exhausted its potential, and therefore was discontinued.

On March 22, 1941, exactly two months after leaving Kiel, the Scharnhorst and Gneisenau arrived at the German-occupied French port of Brest. The experience gained in this ocean operation was to be used in a future campaign, which was planned to be carried out in May along with the new battleship Bismarck, whose completion was already being completed.

The French shipyard in Brest, where specialists who arrived from Wilhelmshafen were in charge, immediately set about repairing both battleships. Repairs were hampered by constant raids on the plant and the city by British bombers. During one of these raids, the Gneisenau was hit, which significantly extended its time under repair. The Scharnhorst turned out to be more successful - it avoided hits and by July 1941 was again in a state of full combat readiness.

During this time, the British managed to sink the Bismarck, which was trying to break into the Atlantic. The heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen accompanying the Bismarck managed to escape from the British and also found refuge in Brest. "Scharnhorst" was transferred to La Pallis, located south of Brest.

The battleship was going to go to sea to test machines and boilers. He stood under camouflage nets, well camouflaged, but nevertheless was discovered by British air reconnaissance. In the midday hours of July 24, the battleship was attacked by a formation of British bombers flying at high altitude. Neither fighters nor heavy anti-aircraft fire could disrupt the attack of enemy aircraft. Five direct hits from aerial bombs marked the ship from bow to stern in dotted lines.

Three heavy armor-piercing bombs penetrated the upper deck of the Scharnhorst, but did not explode. Two smaller bombs exploded on the gun deck but caused only minor damage. Three more heavy air bombs, having exploded near the ship, caused underwater holes to the Scharnhorst, through which the battleship received three thousand tons of water. But even here luck did not leave the Scharnhorst - by some miracle, none of its crew was injured. At a speed of twenty-seven knots, the Scharnhorst went to Brest, where, despite frequent air raids and the need to constantly change parking lots, both battleships were completely repaired by the end of 1941.

Meanwhile, the advantage of the American and British fleets in the Atlantic had become so overwhelming that no one wanted to risk two battleships in new raids. The only opportunity to continue the war against shipping was the Arctic, where convoy routes from England to Murmansk passed along the northern coast of Norway. In these critical months for the Soviet Union, it was necessary at all costs to disorganize the supply of the Red Army with weapons, equipment and ammunition. But first it was necessary to bring heavy ships from Brest back to Germany and there prepare them for operations beyond the Arctic Circle.

After much deliberation, the command of the fleet decided to attempt to break through the ships directly across the English Channel to Germany. Without a doubt, this was the most dangerous path, but with full preservation of secrecy and the element of surprise, it was this

the path gave the ships the greatest chance of success.

Detailed planning for the operation began immediately. Vice Admiral Tsiliaks, who took command of the detachment, was responsible for the initial stage of preparatory measures. Even before the repair of the battleships was completed, fleets of minesweepers were sent into the strait to clear the mines of the fairway, which had to go. The Luftwaffe was supposed to provide air cover, allocating for this purpose two hundred and fifty cars of all classes, large reserves of fuel. Even had to build a few new landing strips. Aviation liaison officers were sent to the ships. At the right time, the radar countermeasure stations were supposed to paralyze the entire enemy radar network on the coast of the English Channel. In addition, all destroyers and torpedo boats capable of operating on the high seas were supposed to be assembled at Brest, which meant that they needed to be led through the strait in a westerly direction.

All these activities were to remain a secret to the British, or at least the preparations were to be carried out in such a way as not to attract their attention. German intelligence spread rumors that in the very near future the ships would leave for another raid in the Atlantic. The general in command of the detached forces of the Luftwaffe invited the admirals and commanders of the ships to hunt wild boars. Invitation cards were specially sent by mail so that everyone would know about the event. The crews of the ships were preparing for an excursion to Paris, which was announced on the local radio.

The exact date of departure from Brest mainly depended on the optimal combination of weather conditions: low cloud cover and fog in the strait, along with the absence of the moon and a favorable tidal current.

Finally, weather forecasters predicted the date of optimal weather, minesweepers reported that the fairway had been cleared of mines, and escort forces concentrated in Brest.

On the evening of February 11, 1942, the Scharnhorst announced the upcoming night exercises in order to somehow justify the need to raise steam.

It was ordered to raise steam at 20:30, most of the mooring lines were given. When, as usual, British reconnaissance aircraft appeared over the port, illuminating the water area with rockets, everything that was possible was covered with smoke screens. Having waited for the departure of the British aircraft, the ships of the formation began to go beyond the booms. Only a few officers were aware of the true purpose of this exit to the sea.

On the Scharnhorst, the watch officer, somewhat concerned about the lack of an accurate course order, asked the ship's navigator, recently promoted to captain second rank, Gissler. He smiled.

- Heading twenty degrees. Tomorrow you will wish your beloved mother a good night in Wilhelmshaven!

The excitement that gripped everyone on the bridge of the battleship soon spread throughout the ship and was indescribable.

The destroyer-escorted formation turned eastward, traveling at twenty-seven knots. At 07:00, Cherbourg remained on the starboard side, and at dawn fighters and light bombers of air cover appeared over the ships. During the night, minesweepers discovered a new minefield near the mouth of the Seine, but the formation, following the minesweepers, crossed it without any incident. Further, the path led to the strait, over which, as forecasters had promised, fog spread. From the bridge were

the white cliffs of Dover are visible. Soon a single British plane appeared, but, quickly shot down by fighters, enveloped in flames, it crashed into the strait.

At noon, exactly on schedule, the narrowest part of the strait between Dover and Cape Gris Nez remained astern. And still there was no sign of any countermeasures from the British. Even the heavy coastal batteries of the enemy were silent. This fact caused the strongest bewilderment.

Finally, through the fog, a cannon flash was seen - some battery of the British opened fire, but its shells, raising gray-green columns of water, fell with large shortfalls on the port side. The torpedo boats quickly covered the detachment with a smoke screen.

On the Scharnhorst, Captain Gissler of the second rank noticed that this breakthrough was more like a training voyage to improve the skills of navigators.

In the area of numerous sand banks, which lay south of the mouth of the Thames, the British began to act more actively. A squadron of Swordfish torpedo bombers and Beowulf bombers attempted to attack the compound, but were all shot down to no avail.

This was followed by new waves of torpedo bombers and bombers, but heavy anti-aircraft fire and fighter cover made all their attempts to strike the ships of the formation in vain.

It started to drizzle, making visibility even worse. Scharnhorst, constantly changing courses in order to evade bombs, tried to stay in line with the minesweepers. At 15:30, when the battleship passed another buoy dropped from a minesweeper to mark the border of the cleared fairway, a strong explosion shook the entire ship, throwing it above the water.

The battleship's cars stopped, the electrical circuits failed, the lights went out in all the rooms, and the Scharnhorst plunged into complete darkness.

A small leak was reported from the engine room, adding that the machines would be stopped for a while.

The admiral immediately ordered one of the guard destroyers to come aboard and boarded it. Whatever happened, he had to continue to command the formation.

The Scharnhorst remained motionless for about half an hour, while the Gneisenau and Prinz Eugen continued on their previous course.

The Scharnhorst was lucky again - during the entire time the ship remained stationary, not a single enemy aircraft appeared above it. Finally, a message came that the left car had been launched, and the Scharnhorst slowly began to move. Soon all three of the battleship's machines were put into action, and the ship increased her speed to twenty-seven knots.

Only torpedo boats remained in the security of the Scharnhorst. The rest of the ships went far ahead. From the radio interception on the Scharnhorst, we learned that the ships that had gone forward entered into a short skirmish with the enemy cruiser and destroyers.

Meanwhile, the British, finally waking up, threw six hundred bombers into the attack on the compound. Until nightfall, one air attack followed another, but the battleship remained unscathed. Only one of the escort torpedo boats received a hit and was forced, under the escort of another boat, to go to the port of Hook for

coast of Holland. Despite the very low cloud cover, the fighters excellently covered the Scharnhorst from air strikes.

The sea route along the Dutch coast was known as "Easy Street", although it was not at all easy. It was surrounded on all sides by sandbars and minefields. In addition, after the mine explosion, echo sounders and radio direction finders did not work on the Scharnhorst, which created additional difficulties ...

Out of the mist ahead, two destroyers suddenly appeared. A boat rolled away from one of them, heading for the Scharnhorst.

— Admiral on the boat! - reported the signal foreman.

The Scharnhorst slowed down so as not to overturn the admiral's boat with its stormy wave. The admiral later told how he was delighted and surprised when the powerful Scharnhorst hull suddenly appeared out of the haze, because he was sure that after a mine explosion, the battleship had gone to seek refuge in one of the nearest Dutch ports.

Night fell, dark and misty. The Scharnhorst was passing Terschelling when, at 10:34 p.m., a powerful explosion from another magnetic mine shook the ship. Fortunately, this time the machines were able to quickly start up again, and the flow of water into the hull was negligible. At low speed, the Scharnhorst approached the meeting point with the port tugs, which brought her to Wilhelmshaven. When the Scharnhorst entered Wilhelmshafen on February 13, other ships had already reached the mouth of the Elbe. Passing under the very noses of the British coastal batteries, the German ships slipped through the English Channel virtually without any loss and arrived in Germany. The Times was compelled to point out that since the 17th century the Royal Navy had not suffered such humiliation in its own waters.

"Nothing can happen to us," the sailors of the Scharnhorst assured everyone. "Our ship is always lucky!"

Scharnhorst was at the Wilhelms-gafen dock for some time, repairing damage to the underwater part from the non-contact explosion of two mines, and then headed to Kiel for a more thorough repair.

The Scharnhorst and Gneisenau lay side by side at the factory berth in Kiel, subjected to daily air raids by British aircraft, which did their best to put these ships out of action. As a result, the Gneisenau received a fatal hit from an aerial bomb, which caused an explosion of the ammunition of the main caliber bow turret and actually tore off the bow of the battleship, putting it out of action forever. And the Scharnhorst, by some miracle, did not receive any damage.

On April 1, 1942, the captain of the first rank Hoffmann, who commanded the Scharnhorst for more than three years, was promoted to Rear Admiral and awarded the Knight's Cross. The new commander of the Scharnhorst was the captain of the first rank Hüfmeier.

By October 1942, the battleship was again put on full alert and left Gotenhafen in January 1943. In March 1943, the long-established plan to transfer the Scharnhorst to Norwegian waters was carried out. Without an admiral on board, escorted by only two destroyers, the battleship arrived at the West Fjord, where the Tirpitz and Admiral Scheer were already with several cruisers and destroyers. A little later, Tirpitz and Scharnhorst moved, respectively, to Alta and Langfjords in the very north of Norway, in order to be in close proximity to the convoy routes going to Russia.

In the summer of 1943, Tirpitz and Scharnhorst raided Svalbard, subjecting

the island was bombed, as a result of which coal mines were flooded and important military installations were damaged.

However, they still have not begun to carry out their main task - attacking the convoy, citing a lack of intelligence and adverse weather conditions.

II

In February 1943, the situation in all theaters of military operations began to take shape not in favor of Germany. The disaster at Stalingrad for the first time in the entire war put Germany in the face of a possible defeat in the war. Despite all the efforts of submarines and aircraft, Britain and the United States delivered to Russia a huge amount of weapons and military materials.

After the arrival of each convoy in Murmansk, the Wehrmacht soldiers who fought in Russia felt for themselves how much stronger their enemy became. Stronger and, most importantly, more mobile. Tens of thousands of heavy trucks that appeared in the Russian army radically changed its tactical and strategic capabilities. And the trucks were just a drop in the ocean of overseas deliveries.

As in the years of the First World War, the German land army - from ordinary soldiers to field marshals - asked itself the question: why is the fleet idle? Why don't heavy ships make any attempts to interrupt the flow of allied aid to Russia? Why do they allow convoys to pass within a few dozen miles of their bases without doing anything, leaving aircraft and submarines to fight the convoys? Since Grand Admiral Raeder could not clearly answer all these questions, he was removed from his post on January 30, 1943. Grossadmiral Doenitz, who replaced him as commander-in-chief, assured that German battleships would henceforth actively oppose Russian convoys. Reassuring the high command with these assurances, the new commander-in-chief, apparently, well understood that he risked destroying the few remaining heavy ships in service that the German fleet still possessed.

The German fleet was initially weak, and its opponents were well aware of this. It was no secret to them that the main forces of the German fleet were concentrated in the north of Norway in order to strike at convoys going to Russia. So they took steps to minimize the success of any such venture. The Arctic convoys were regarded as objects of great strategic importance, and numerous and powerful formations of the allied fleets were allocated to cover them. The superiority of the enemy in these waters was absolute, as any German sailor knew.

But this does not mean that no one believed in the possibility of success. There were plans to divert and bypass the security forces with access directly to the transport of the convoy. The risk, of course, existed, but quite reasonable and calculated.

However, if the superiority of the enemy at sea was absolute, then in the air this superiority in the Arctic region was simply immeasurable. German ships practically had neither fighter cover nor the ability to conduct the most elementary aerial reconnaissance. Even in case of emergency, the Luftwaffe could not provide any assistance to the ships.

But the main reason for the inactivity of capital ships was known only to a few. According to intelligence, the British and Americans already had a system on their ships.

radar guidance of guns of the main and auxiliary calibers. Therefore, in a night battle - and it was the height of the Polar Night - German ships would have to blindly fight with a completely sighted enemy.

All this could be taken into account if it were not for the desperate situation that was developing on the Eastern Front, where the shaft of the non-stop Russian offensive was gaining momentum, and the High Command demanded that all possible measures be taken to somehow ease the pressure on the dwindling German troops on the Eastern Front.

Aviation, having suffered terrible losses, was completely exhausted.

The successes of submarines from February 1943 became more and more insignificant, their indicator fell every month. But there were still battleships in the Arctic, consolidated into two battle groups.

However, only one Scharnhorst was in combat readiness.

All other ships, for various reasons, were unable to take part in operations against Arctic convoys.

The Tirpitz was heavily damaged by an attack by British midget submarines and was being repaired in Kaa Fjord. The heavily damaged Gneisenau stood with its nose torn off in Gotenhafen. Lützow and Scheer, together with both heavy cruisers, were needed in the Baltic. All that was left was the Scharnhorst with five destroyers of her escort - the First Battle Group.

The commander of the First Battle Group, Admiral Kummerz, was on vacation in Germany, and his duties were temporarily performed by Rear Admiral Bey, commander of the destroyer detachment. He never commanded heavy ships, having spent his entire service on light cruisers and destroyers.

On the night of December 19-20, 1943, Grand Admiral Doenitz, attending a regular meeting at the Fuhrer's Headquarters (in Wolfschanz, East Prussia), unexpectedly announced to many that the Scharnhorst and several destroyers escorting it, would destroy the convoy en route from Halifax to Russia if the opportunity presents itself.

On the morning of December 24, 1943, on Christmas Eve, the command of the German Navy received a message that the long-awaited convoy "JW", bound for Murmansk, was already at sea. The route of the convoy led to the northeast, past Greenland, Iceland, Svalbard, around the North Cape to Murmansk - on the coast of the Kola Peninsula. The convoy was covered by the English fleet.

The direct escort of the convoy included destroyers, frigates and patrol boats intended for operations against submarines.

The second line of defense of the transports was made up of heavy and light cruisers, which traveled in a parallel course, covering the flank of the caravan open towards the Norwegian coast, from where an enemy attack could be expected. The cruisers were in full readiness to repel the actions of German surface ships, if any followed.

The number of transports that followed in the Arctic convoys usually varied from twenty-five to thirty units, sometimes more. As a rule, in their holds, on average, there were up to half a million tons of priceless cargo: heavy and aviation weapons, tanks, ammunition and other military materials, without which no warring country can do.

If the Scharnhorst had succeeded in breaking through the guards and attacking the convoy from the flank, it could have inflicted more damage on the enemy in a few hours than the entire fleet of submarines during the last months of 1943.

The command of the German fleet received the first information about the JW 55 B convoy from submarines, which had been continuously tracking it from the moment it was discovered. In reality, what was unknown to the German command, there were two convoys at sea. The second, under the index "RA 55 A" - consisting of twenty-two transports, went empty from Russia, having managed to reach Bear Island - between the North Cape and Svalbard unnoticed.

Having received a message from submarines and reconnaissance aircraft, which gave very approximate data on the location of the convoy, its speed and course, Doenitz immediately ordered the Scharnhorst to go to sea in order to attack and destroy this convoy.

Meanwhile, in the proposed operational area where the Scharnhorst was to operate, a storm raged, the southwest wind blew almost with the force of a hurricane, snow charges raged, ten-meter waves rose.

Having soberly assessed the weather conditions, the commander of the fleet, Admiral Schniewind, tried to convince the high command, if not to cancel, then at least to postpone the planned operation. For the Commander-in-Chief of the Kriegsmarine, this was also a very difficult decision. The Grand Admiral contacted Rear Admiral Bey, who was acting commander of the First Battle Group, but the latter expressed complete confidence in the possibility of fulfilling the assigned combat mission. In addition, Doenitz was strongly influenced by messages from a submarine that monitored the convoy and assured that it had only cruisers and various small anti-submarine defense ships in its escort, which the Scharnhorst could deal with relatively easily. And the commander-in-chief gave the order to start the operation.

After analyzing the data of the latest reports about the location of the convoy, Admiral Schniewind ordered the Scharnhorst and five destroyers of its escort to go to sea right on Christmas Day - December 25 at 17:00. Having received the order, Rear Admiral Bey began to prepare his ships for the exit.

On Christmas Day 1943, the almost complete darkness of the long polar night hung over the Alta Fjord. The black waters of the fiord breathed icy cold, and a blizzard howled in the snow-covered hills. A prickly wind churned the white crests of the waves on the usually calm waters of the fiord. The dark sky was occasionally lit up with flashes of northern lights.

The ships of the First Battle Group were stationed in various parts of the Alta Fjord. Rear Admiral Bey was on board the Tirpitz, recently damaged by British dwarf submarines and now stationed in Kaa Fjord, at its southwestern tip.

The Scharnhorst was rocking at anchor in the western part of the Langfjord. Behind him, closer to the coast, were three destroyers of the fourth flotilla: Z-29, Z-34 and Z-38. Two more destroyers - Z-30 and Z-33 - were in the Kaa-fjord near the Tirpitz. On all ships, as usual, officers and sailors celebrated Christmas Eve, but now all traces of yesterday's holiday have disappeared. Christmas trees, holiday decorations and everything else were removed from all rooms. The crew was in a somewhat agitated state, as the order was given to the ship to prepare to go to sea by 19:00. The last time the battleship went to sea was a long time ago, everyone was fed up with the parking in the fiord, and everyone was happy about the opportunity to change the situation.

Only a few people knew what lay ahead for the Scharnhorst: the admiral, the officers of his staff, the commander of the Scharnhorst, and two or three more senior officers.

On the upper deck and in the engine room, preparations for the campaign were in full swing. Curiously wary glances accompanied the foreman of the navigational combat unit

Jurgens, who emerged from the commander's salon with his hands full of cards. From the bridge, the battleships communicated with the destroyers with signal lights. From December 21, Scharnhorst and its guards were ordered to be on six-hour readiness.

On December 22, Admiral Nordmau, commander of the naval forces of the North Sea, relayed the order for the transition of the Battle Group to a three-hour readiness.

On the same day at 10:45, a report came from a reconnaissance aircraft that a convoy of about forty transports had been found four hundred miles west of Trondheim, traveling with escort ships on a course of forty-five degrees, at a speed of ten knots. Then, for some time, contact with the convoy was lost.

On December 23, at 11:23, the convoy was again detected: it was heading thirty at a speed of ten knots. According to updated data, the convoy did not consist of forty transports, but of seventeen cargo ships and three tankers, marching in seven columns under the escort of three or four cruisers, nine destroyers and corvettes. Another report that a cruiser and five destroyers had been sighted east of the convoy came at 12:14.

Having received this report, the commander of the submarine forces ordered the submarines at sea to search for the enemy to the west of Bear Island. On Christmas Eve at 14:00, a message came from the commander of the air unit on the island of Lafontaine, which indicated the location of the convoy at 12:20. The convoy was reported to have sailed on a fifty-degree course, at a speed of eight knots.

On Christmas morning at 10:00, the reconnaissance aircraft reported the new location of the convoy. Then the commander of one of the eight submarines, Captain-Lieutenant Hansen, went on the air, reporting that at 09:00 the convoy had passed him. He gave the place to the convoy, saying that it was following a course of sixty degrees.

Having received these reports, Rear Admiral Bey at 12:15 ordered the Scharnhorst and the fourth destroyer flotilla to be in hourly readiness to leave. At 2:20 p.m. Lieutenant Commander Hansen radioed: "Convoy in square AB 6723, heading sixty degrees, speed eight knots. Weather: south wind seven points, rain, visibility two miles.

It was at this moment that the commander of the naval group "North", Admiral Schniewind, tried to convince the commander-in-chief to postpone the operation due to insufficient intelligence and adverse weather conditions. But after a conversation with Doenitz, Schniewind withdrew his objections and handed over to Rear Admiral Bey a short cipher: "Eastern Front, 25.12", which meant: "The first battle group to attack the convoy on the day the radio message was received, that is, December 25."

The radiogram was received at 14:15, and an hour later a clarification came: "Eastern Front, 17:00." The exit to the sea was delayed for two hours in order to enable Rear Admiral Bey and the officers of his headquarters, who were on the Tirpitz, to move to the Scharnhorst.

In Hammerfest, northeast of Alta Fjord, there were two minesweepers of the Fifth Mine Sweeping Flotilla: Lieutenant Wilhelm Macloth's R-56 and Second Lieutenant Berner House's R-58. At 15:00, an order was transmitted to the minesweepers by radio: "Immediately proceed to the Scharnhorst." Posting to Point Lucy.

Point Lucy was located northwest of Hasvik, west of the island of Soreya, where the extreme boundary of possible minefields passed, which the Scharnhorst-led detachment had to pass before reaching the open sea. The two small boats immediately weighed anchor. A storm wind from the southwest caused both commanders significant

doubts about the possibility of carrying out a mine-sweeping operation. Even in the fiord, the minesweepers could hardly rake against the wind. But an order is an order, and in complete darkness, the minesweepers, keeping in the wake, headed for Alta Fjord. They traveled this route often and knew it well. Only in one place did they encounter a navigational problem: the entrance to the Langfjord (the western branch of the Altafjord) was closed with steel nets, behind which the Scharnhorst and three destroyers were anchored. In weather conditions like today, this barrier, with its small black buoys, was hard to spot. A tiny patrol boat was on standby upon receipt of the appropriate order to spread these nets and open the exit from the fiord.

The night of December 25 was quite clear and starry, but moonless, and therefore unusually dark. When the minesweepers approached the entrance to the Langfjord, only flashes of the distant northern lights in the northwestern part of the sky illuminated their path.

Approaching the barrier, the minesweeper teams watched with alarm the unusually large waves coming into the fiord from the open sea. A storm wind blowing from the south-west generated additional squalls and waves that crashed ashore along the northern slopes of the coastal hills. They created complete chaos in the direction of the fjord currents and caused a sharp drop in air temperature. In this whirlwind of foam and spray, it was very difficult to find the buoys of the barrier, but Lieutenant Macloth's lead minesweeper R-56 found the buoys and slipped into a narrow passage opened by a patrol boat on orders from the Scharnhorst.

The minesweeper R-58, following it at a distance of about two hundred meters, suddenly completely lost its bearings. The commander and all the watch on the bridge peered vainly into the darkness, trying to find the patrol boat, although they knew that it was somewhere close to the coast, camouflaged against the background of coastal rocks.

- The fence is right on the nose! the signalman suddenly shouted.

Second Lieutenant House saw several black buoys bouncing on the waves and stars barely visible in the dim light right on the bow, and immediately gave a full reverse. But it was already too late. Everyone on the minesweeper felt the slight jolt that happens when a ship runs aground. Hanging from the bridge over the rail, the commander made sure that the minesweeper climbed into the net fence about half the length of the hull. Giving alternately forward and reverse, they freed themselves from the net and, finally finding a passage, entered Lang Fjord. Soon the Scharnhorst blackened ahead like a gigantic ghost. It was about 17:00 when R-58, having approached the port side of the battleship, moored to R-56.

Complete calm in the fiord seemed strange after such a storm at the entrance. Carefully darkened destroyers stood behind the battleship's stern. Not a single glimmer of light could be seen around. There was complete silence. Only from the high bridge of the Scharnhorst, in the direction of the destroyers, was a signal light flashing with a long-short ghostly violet light. The silence seemed unreal, supernatural, like in a dream.

Despite the cold, Lieutenant Macloth took off his leather jacket, leaving himself in a tunic that showed off the recently received Iron Cross. Leaning over the railing of the bridge, he shouted at a nearby minesweeper:

- Hey House! We are ordered to immediately report to the commander of the battleship. Hurry! Where have you been all this time?

Couldn't find a passage in the net fence. I ran into a net," replied the junior lieutenant.

"All right," Macloth interrupted him. "Come on, full speed ahead!"

The minesweeper commanders climbed the ladder to the deck of the battleship and involuntarily fell silent. They have never had to be on such a huge ship, striking in its monstrous size and incredible complexity. They are accustomed to feel like sailors, masters of their tiny boats, and not cogs in a huge mechanism.

After looking around and gradually coming to their senses, the minesweeper commanders reported the arrival to the ship's duty officer, and then to the watch officer. He called some junior lieutenant and said in an everyday voice:

"Please escort the gentlemen of the commanders to our commander.

They were very flattered that the officer on duty called them "commanders", as if equating them with the commander of the Scharnhorst. However, in the Navy, the commander is always the commander, regardless of what he commands, a battleship or a minesweeper ...

They followed the junior lieutenant along the quarterdeck, which seemed endless, then went through passages and corridors with rows of officers' cabin doors, turned into some kind of transverse corridors, and, when they finally reached the commander's cabin, they completely lost their bearings. The second lieutenant knocked and opened the door, letting Macloth and House go ahead.

Both looked at each other in surprise. By their standards, the room they entered was simply luxurious. Having saluted, they silently began to expect what would follow next.

In the center of the vast space of the commander's saloon, the commander, senior officer and senior mechanical engineer stood and talked. The adjutant of the commander was also there, holding a blank radiogram in his hand. The battleship commander said something to the senior mechanical engineer, and the minesweeper commanders heard a few last words: "... preparations for the exit should be correspondingly accelerated. We start moving at 18:00. While the commander of the Scharnhorst gave the last instructions to his officers - Captain Second Rank Dominik and Captain Third Rank Koenig, the minesweeper commanders continued to look around in confusion.

There were comfortable armchairs in the command saloon, paintings hung on the bulkheads, framed photographs flaunted on the mahogany desk. In one of the corners of the cabin, Second Lieutenant House saw a festively decorated Christmas table: nuts, sweets, tangerines, cookies, Christmas tree branches decorated with sparkles and colored ribbons. Of course, House remembered. Today is Christmas! He completely forgot about it and would not have remembered if he had not seen this table. He still recalled with nostalgia the last peaceful Christmas, when the commander of the Scharnhorst, Captain First Rank Ginze, headed towards them.

Are you minesweeper commanders? asked Ginze. "Danke zer. The senior officer will give you detailed instructions.

Captain Second Rank Dominic nodded his head and gestured for the lieutenants to follow him to his quarters. When they were already going out into the corridor, the battleship commander turned to Lieutenant Macloth:

- One minute please.

The commander pulled an envelope from his desk drawer and handed it to the lieutenant:

"Sorry, I'm afraid I didn't catch your last name.

"Makloth, Captain First Rank," the officer reported.

"Thank you, Macloth. Would you be kind enough to send my letter? Our mail has already gone.

"Certainly, sir captain first rank, with pleasure," replied Macloth, carefully placing the white envelope in the pocket of his tunic.

Leaving the commander's cabin, the lieutenants followed the chief mate to his cabin. The senior officer's cabin was also spacious and comfortably furnished. A large photograph of the family of a captain of the second rank in a beautiful frame stood on a littered with papers table.

Under the porthole, decorated with an intricate curtain, on a mahogany stand was an antique barograph. One of the bulkheads was lined with books.

The first officer invited the young officers to sit down, and they drowned in the unfamiliar luxury of deep armchairs. The captain of the second rank, apologizing, glanced through some papers that appeared in his absence, and then turned to the minesweeper commanders:

- So. Remind me what your top speed is?

"Sixteen knots, Captain Second Class," Macloth reported.

— And with trawls?

The lieutenant, after a slight hesitation, replied: "Fourteen knots," - he wanted to add that, of course, only in good weather, and not in such a storm, but said nothing. He was sure that the operation would be postponed, and the minesweepers would not have to die in such weather. Don't the battleships know what's going on at sea? The commanding voice of the sergeant-major interrupted his thoughts.

- For further instructions, contact the liaison officer. I have a lot of things to do before sailing.

The senior officer pressed the bell button, calling the messenger.

— Escort the lieutenants to the communications officer.

And having exchanged a quick handshake with the commanders of the minesweepers, the first officer escorted them out from the cabin.

"No one here has time for us," Macloth whispered to House as they followed the messenger down the corridor.

It was hard work - to follow the messenger, who actually ran along endless corridors, passages, through some rooms, workshops, control posts, cockpits, telephone exchanges. Both officers felt hopelessly lost in this steel labyrinth. The messenger ran ahead, never looking back at those he was leading to the communications center.

"Hey!" Lieutenant Macloth called out to him. "Where are you going in such a hurry?" Don't run away from us, or we'll never get out of here!

In general, both lieutenants have already paid attention to the fact that everyone on the ship was running somewhere, as if in a disturbed anthill. The minesweeper commanders could not, of course, understand that this was the usual state of the people on the battleship, which was preparing to go to sea.

Stumbling over sacks of potatoes stacked in a narrow passageway, they finally reached the radio room, where they were met by a communications officer, Lieutenant Commander Baer. Here again there was no reason for long conversations. The minesweeper commanders were experienced officers and knew their business well. They have already had countless times to drive battleships, cruisers, destroyers and small convoys behind trawls. They did this in the North Sea, and in the English Channel, and in the waters from Skudesnes to the North Cape (North Cape). They had to escort ships to Narvik, Tromsø, Hammerfest, Kirkenes and Petsamo under the noses of Russian coastal batteries on the Rybachy Peninsula, hiding behind smoke screens ...

How are we going to keep in touch? Macloth asked.

- Of course, by radiotelephone. Voice," Ber replied.

A few more questions and answers, and the briefing was over.

When the minesweeper commanders left the radio room, they noted with satisfaction that the messenger was waiting for them outside the door to show them the way from this labyrinth to the upper deck. They did not know anyone on board the Scharnhorst, and no one, in all this confusion, of course, even thought to invite them to the wardroom and treat them to something, which is inevitable under normal circumstances.

After being aboard the battleship for just over half an hour, both commanders were delighted to return to their little ships, where, in their tiny cabins, orderlies served them dinner with a glass of blessed schnapps ...

For two hours, from 17:00 to 19:00, the minesweepers, without receiving any orders, stood at the side of the battleship. Second Lieutenant House was reading from his bunk, enjoying an unexpected rest. The rest was interrupted by the signalman's report.

— Lieutenant, an R-121 is approaching the Scharnhorst with some people on board.

The junior lieutenant jumped out onto the bridge.

— Who are these people? Where are they from?

"I don't know, Herr Lieutenant," answered the signalman. "They say that among them is a pilot and synoptic.

"Strange," drawled House. "But what do we care about that?" and went back to the cabin.

In fact, the R-121, under the command of the conductor Horst Stobk, delivered the admiral and his staff from the Tirpitz to the Scharnhorst. But Second Lieutenant House finds out about this only after eight years ...

House even had time to take a short nap in his cabin, when a voice from the Scharnhorst, amplified by a mouthpiece, gave the command:

- Minesweepers move away from the side!

Having quickly given up moorings, the minesweepers elegantly and silently, like ghosts, moved away from the battleship and stopped, waiting for further orders.

A few minutes later, two small tugboats approached the Scharnhorst. The fiord was too narrow for the huge Scharnhorst, with its nose to the wind, to turn around on its own towards the exit and pass under its cars through the gate in the net barrier.

At the same time, on the Scharnhorst, an order was transmitted to the entire crew via the ship's broadcast to line up on the quarterdeck. People ran upstairs, lining up in lines, realizing that now the veil of secrecy would be lifted, and they would finally find out where and why they were going.

The tall figure of Captain Second Rank Dominic appeared in front of the formation. He served on the Scharnhorst from the moment the battleship was commissioned, going from anti-aircraft battery commander to senior officer. He was very popular among the sailors, and everyone held their breath, waiting for what the first mate would say.

"On behalf of the ship's commander," Captain Second Rank Dominic began his brief address, "I inform the crew of the ship ...

The officers and sailors learned that the Scharnhorst had received orders to attack the convoy and, if possible, destroy it. The convoy is carrying weapons to the Eastern Front.

- We will destroy it and alleviate the situation of our comrades fighting on the Eastern Front ...

There were shouts of delight. Forgetting about discipline for a moment, several sailors lifted the first mate on their shoulders and carried them along the line. Then everyone ran to their places.

Three minutes later (a record time!) All combat posts reported their readiness for battle. The captain of the first rank Ginze, after listening to the report of the first mate, put his hand to the visor of his cap:

— Nothing is impossible for the Scharnhorst with such a great crew, Dominic!

When the senior officer went to the forecastle to supervise the filming of the battleship from anchor, a motor boat appeared from the side of the exit from the fiord, barely visible in the dark. The sailors of the Scharnhorst, allocated for anti-submarine defense of the approaches to the ship anchorages, were returning on the boat. Cruising at the entrance to the fiord, they dropped small depth charges into the water from time to time to scare off dwarf boats and British submarine saboteurs if they tried to penetrate the net barrier.

This service was constantly carried out after the attack of the British midjets on the Tirpitz. The demolition men, commanded by Chief Sergeant Gedde, quickly boarded the Scharnhorst, and the battleship commander immediately gave the order to weigh anchor. Engine telegraphs chimed readiness as the tugboats turned the huge ship around with its bow to the exit. The tugboats were given away, and the water behind the stern of the battleship began to seethe from the working propellers. The Scharnhorst began to move, slowly approaching the net fence at the exit of the Langfjord. For minesweeper commanders, it was an unforgettable sight. The long graceful shadow of a huge ship silently glided over the surface of the water in complete darkness, resembling a mythical monster that emerges from its lair in search of prey on the high seas.

Both minesweepers, without receiving any new orders, followed the stern of the battleship in the wake of each other. The signal light on the bridge of the Scharnhorst transmitted a message with blue flashes to the destroyer Z-29, which answered something to him. The destroyer Z-38 overtook the minesweepers, passed the battleship, taking a place six cables ahead of her to help in navigation on the approach to the barrier.

The other two destroyers Z-29 and Z-34 held on to the battleship's stern.

Suddenly, the minesweeper heard an order transmitted by radiotelephone:

"Speed 17 knots!"

The radio room on the minesweeper was in front of the bridge, just below it. Amazed, House leaned over the railing, shouting to the radio operator:

- What's happened? Seventeen knots? Did you misheard?

"Absolutely, lieutenant," the radio operator reported. "Seventeen knots. This order was passed on to the destroyers.

"That's not for us," thought the R-58 commander. "Even without trawls, we can't give more than sixteen knots, and the senior officer of the Scharnhorst knows about it. He asked me about it himself.

Glancing at the second minesweeper, House made sure that he was also far behind the battleship. The destroyers moved forward. R-121, which delivered the admiral and his staff to the battleship, also without receiving any orders, kept on a parallel course with the minesweepers. The battleship was asked about something from him, but received a sharp order not to interfere with the transmission of signals.

By 19:55, when the entire battle group passed through the net barrier, both minesweepers were already well behind. House's minesweeper again failed to find a passage in the nets, jumped onto the net, spending a lot of time to find the passage.

Slowly and calmly, the patrol boat closed the passage with nets and went to its usual place under the shore. Minesweeper R-56 was nowhere to be seen, but soon a signal light flashed in the darkness.

"Call from R-56," the signalman reported.

"Acknowledge the reception," House ordered. - I'm getting closer. Full speed ahead!

"The battleship is heading for Varget Sound," the signalman remarked. "We definitely need to return to Hammerfest. What do you think, Herr Lieutenant?

House shrugged.

But there is no order. However, I also think so. But if...

'Order from the Scharnhorst: 'All battle group seventeen knots,' the signalman reported again.

"That could be taken as an order for us to return to base," House said philosophically. Especially to Point Lucy!

Meanwhile, the Battle Group was already out of sight, slowly fading into the pitch blackness. darkness.

Second Lieutenant House was still thinking about what to do next, but, fortunately, out of the darkness, the signal light of the minesweeper R-56 flickered again.

'Order from R-56,' reported Signal Chief Pitz. 'Follow me. Heading for Hammerfest.

For the minesweepers of the fifth mine flotilla, the operation "Eastern Front" ended.

And the Scharnhorst and the destroyers of its escort at 20:37 passed the outer barrier of the fiord at a speed of seventeen knots, passed the straits of Stjern and Stoeroy and went out to the open sea, increasing the speed to twenty-five knots.

At 22:00, the admiral ordered two destroyers to take their places on the battleship's beams, and the destroyer Z-29 to come forward, becoming, as it were, the tip of a spear rushing forward.

At 11:04 p.m., the formation passed Point Lucy, and then, at a speed of twenty-five knots, took a course of ten degrees - to the point where, according to the calculations of the navigators, the convoy should be intercepted.

In the open sea, the ships were met by a storm and the impenetrable darkness of the polar night. The stars twinkled coldly in the distant sky, welcoming the beginning of the operation, the faint northern lights shone palely.

III

The Commander of the English Home Fleet, Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser, held his flag on the battleship Duke of York. A small detachment, known as "Connection-2", was directly subordinate to the commander and consisted of the battleship "Duke of York", the light cruiser "Jamaica" and the destroyers: "Savage", "Scorpion", "Samarets" and "Stord". Admiral Frazer personally commanded the escort of the convoys, providing them with long-range cover and hoping, under favorable conditions, to intercept and destroy the Scharnhorst.

Compound 2 escorted the previous convoy, JW 55 A, bound for Russia, all the way to the Kola Bay, after which Admiral Fraser returned with his ships to Akureyri on the northern coast of Iceland. The main part of the ships of the British fleet, engaged in escorting Russian convoys, was based here.

On December 23, 1943, while the ships of Connection 2 replenished their fuel supplies, Admiral Fraser called a meeting of his staff officers and ship commanders on the battleship. On the huge table of the admiral's salon lay a large-scale map of the entire Arctic region, covering a vast territory from Greenland to Murmansk. Attached to it were detailed maps of individual sections, tables of temperature differences, tides, the range of various ships, the fuel they consumed and

etc.

The admiral entered the room and, after the usual exchange of greetings with the officers present, immediately got down to business:

- Gentlemen, I want to discuss the activities related to the escort of the JW 55 B convoy. As you know, the convoy "JW 55 A", which we escorted, reached Murmansk without any incident. Therefore, I am convinced that now the Scharnhorst will go to sea and try to attack the JW 55 B. If everything goes as I planned, we should have a couple of night exercises in the near future.

The commander was replaced by the chief of staff, who unfolded a detailed map of the area around Medvezhiy Island in front of the assembled people.

"The main danger zone," announced the chief of staff, "is in the area of Bear Island. Unfortunately, the autonomy of our destroyers does not allow us to be in cover during the entire duration of the convoys. Therefore, it is our intention, traveling at a speed of fifteen knots, to meet the convoy at Bear Island, which will allow the entire formation to remain in the most dangerous area for thirty hours. During this time, the RA55 A convoy coming from Russia will just approach Bear Island from the east. This

the convoy consists of twenty-two ships and eight escort destroyers, as well as the minesweeper Sigall. In addition, there are also two destroyers and three corvettes of the Western Approach Command. As far as we know, so far there is no indication that the enemy knows anything about this convoy. In any case, it is unlikely that the Germans will attack an empty convoy, but this possibility cannot be completely ruled out.

"Now about the convoy JW 55 B," continued the chief of staff, "which we have to escort. It consists of nineteen merchant ships. They are escorted by eight destroyers: Onslow, Onsooft, Iroquois, Orwell, Charon, Skudge, Impals and Haida. With them is the minesweeper Gleaner. In addition, there are two destroyers from the Western Approach Command - Whitehall and Wrestler, as well as corvettes Honeysuckle and Oxlip. Long-range cover for the convoy is carried out by the tenth cruiser squadron of Vice Admiral Barnett, conventionally referred to as "Connection-1" and consisting of the heavy cruiser "Norfolk" and the light cruisers "Belfast" and "Sheffield".

Despite the tightly closed doors, the life of a giant ship burst into the room where the meeting was held: loudspeaker announcements, the clatter of sailor's boots and the noise of cars scurrying alongside the tugboat.

Then the admiral spoke again:

"If we meet the Scharnhorst," said Sir Bruce, "I have decided to approach her and to begin by opening fire with illuminating shells from a distance of twelve thousand yards.

The admiral paused, glancing at the battleship's commander, Captain First Class Russell. The commander nodded grimly.

"Then," the admiral continued, turning to the destroyer commanders, "I intend to bring you all into a half-battalion so that at the right moment I can launch a torpedo attack on the Scharnhorst." Do you agree with me gentlemen?

Second Captain Meyrick and the three third-class captains Clauston, Walmsley and Storhill instinctively straightened their shoulders to indicate that they fully approved of the commander's plan.

Nodding his head, Admiral Fraser now turned to the commander of the light cruiser Jamaica, Captain First Rank Huge-Hallet:

"You and your Jamaica will be with me. However, I give you freedom of action, and you can move away from the battleship without losing contact with it, as much as the current situation requires.

— Yes, sir! - the cruiser commander briefly answered, making it clear that the commander's intention was clear to him.

"We are a little behind in combat training, constantly escorting convoys," the admiral concluded his speech. "Therefore, I find that we need to practice a little, so that everyone knows with confidence what to do in a battle night environment. Be ready to go to sea today at 23:00. Thank you gentlemen.

As ordered, "Connection-2" went to sea an hour before midnight on December 23, 1943. Having passed the long arm of the Eya-fjord, inside which the Akurei-ri base was located, the ships went out to the open sea. Grimsey Island, off the northern coast of Iceland, remained far to the west when the signal was given on the flagship battleship for the start of night exercises. The light cruiser "Jamaica" was out of order and, raising a large surf up its bow, began to overtake the rest of the ships of the formation, going far ahead. When the cruiser

passed by the battleship Duke of York, from which for some time the massive silhouette of a battleship with a heavy bow superstructure, two tall chimneys and four-gun turrets of the main caliber became visible. Then the battleship was swallowed up by the darkness of the night. From the battleship they also followed the cruiser leaving into the darkness. Waves crashed into its forecastle, splashed over the bow towers, crashing against the bow superstructure, dousing the navigation bridge with a cloud of spray. A stormy wind blew in from the southwest. The slender and graceful cruiser heeled heavily on the waves. Soon he disappeared from the sight of those watching him from the bridge of the battleship. The teachings have begun.

The battleship commander, after reading the weather forecast, turned to the navigator:

— Strengthens the Zuyd-West. Tomorrow, apparently, will be a real storm. What is your opinion, pilot?

The steward nodded.

- Yes, sir. I think the storm will last for several days. I am sure that snowstorms will begin soon. Apparently, we will enjoy the real polar weather. Married people better not try, sir.

By noon the next day, December 24, the exercises were completed, and the chief of staff invited the admiral to the navigation room. Important radiograms arrived, and soon the admiral and his staff were bending over the maps, enjoying the warmth and bright light in the wheelhouse.

Radiograms reported that the convoy "JW 55 B" was detected by enemy aircraft, which was tracking it. The convoy was at this point halfway between the islands of Jan Mayen and Bear, and the admiral expressed concern that the merchant ships would be completely unguarded if they were attacked right now. Barnett's cruisers are too far away, and their movement is likely to be monitored by enemy submarines.

The chief of staff, having measured the distance between the formation and the convoy, objected to the commander:

"The convoy is still well west of Bear Island, and German surface ships have never ventured so far west. It does not seem that they dare to do so even now.

In the end, Sir Bruce announced his decision.

"I consider it necessary to break the radio silence," the admiral said. - At 14:00, send a radio message to the convoy to go for three hours at a reduced speed. And we, on the contrary, will increase the speed, say, to nineteen knots. It is clear that this will bring us little closer to the convoy, but it will discourage the Scharnhorst from attacking the convoy before dark. Of course, if it is in the sea. I personally think that's the way it is.

At 14:00, as ordered by Admiral Fraser, a radio message flew to the convoy, ordering all of its ships to slow down.

However, by the evening of December 24, it became obvious that the convoy, due to stormy weather, was already moving at a much slower speed than was prescribed. As for the empty convoy from Murmansk, it was already west of Medvezhiy Island, still undiscovered by the enemy. Admiral Fraser and his staff in the wheelhouse of the flagship laying of the battleship "Duke of York" continued to analyze the emerging situation.

- The return convoy, apparently, was never detected by the enemy, - the commander concluded.
- This inclines me more and more to think that our convoy will be attacked. Submarines are probably already prowling around, looking for a way to attack. But, besides them, Scharnhorst should also attack the convoy. I am more than convinced of this.

The admiral thought for a moment, then ordered the chief of staff:

"Contact the destroyer commander of the Home Fleet and ask him, if possible, to take the following actions: first, turn the RA convoy north to clear the operational area for us. Secondly, send four destroyers from the escort of the RA 55 A convoy to the escort of the JW 55 B convoy. I believe that the RA convoy is already safe, and the Germans are concentrating all their forces to JW.

"I am sure," continued the commander, "that Barnett and his cruisers will be able to drive off the Scharnhorst, if she appears, inflicting such damage on her that we will have time to approach the battlefield.

At that moment, the battleship rocked so that Admiral Fraser could barely keep on his feet, grabbing the table-tablet on which the map lay.

- Well, the weather, - Sir Bruce commented, holding on to the table. - What a horror!
- A terrible storm, sir, - confirmed the chief of staff, rubbing his bruised elbow. - And with a snow storm, too.

December 25 passed without incident, except for the fact that the storm had reached the strength of a hurricane, blinding snow charges completely reduced visibility to zero.

During the night of December 25/26, Connection 2 continued eastward at seventeen knots. The Duke of York, going against the wind and waves, sank into the water so that only the swaying bow superstructure remained on the surface. Then the bow of the battleship, dropping tons of arctic water from itself, reappeared on the surface in a cloud of foam and spray. In a moment, heavily listing now to port, then to starboard, the battleship again burrowed into huge waves. Few of the crew could sleep in such conditions throughout the night - the same night that the Scharnhorst and five destroyers left Alta Fjord.

On December 26, at 03:39, the head of the communications service of "Connection-2" entered the admiral's camp cabin, located behind the flagship bridge.

Seeing that the admiral, despite the terrible chatter, was fast asleep in his armchair, the officer hesitated for a moment, but then resolutely woke the commander.

"Urgent radiogram from the Admiralty, sir!" - reported the head of communications.

The admiral, waking up instantly, jumped to his feet and read the radiogram.

"The chief of staff has already been informed, sir!" - the communications officer said, noting that the smile spreads on the face of the commander as the radiogram is read.

There was a knock on the door, and the chief of staff literally flew into the room.

— What did I say? exclaimed the Admiral triumphantly. "The Admiralty believes that the Scharnhorst is at sea. When was the radiogram sent? Yep, at 03:19. Follow me gentlemen!

Balancing on the ladders, the officers quickly climbed into the wheelhouse of the flagship pad.

The admiral and the chief of staff bent over the map.

"If the Scharnhorst attacks the convoy during daylight hours, taking advantage of the midday twilight, and then quickly withdraws, we will not be close enough to cut off its withdrawal," the Chief of Staff remarked.

"Unfortunately not," the admiral agreed, leaning on the table with both hands. "In that case, we won't be able to catch him.

"I beg your pardon, sir," the head of communications intervened. "But we will definitely be able to do this if the Barnett cruisers are intercepted and the Scharnhorst is tied up in battle.

"It would be nice," Sir Bruce muttered and turned to the chief of staff:

- When do you think the destroyers from guarding the "RA" convoy will be able to get to our "JW" convoy?

"Not later than 16:00," the chief of staff reported.

— What destroyers are allocated? the admiral asked.

The chief of staff pulled out a sheet of paper from the breast pocket of his tunic:

"Musketeer, Opportune, Virago and Matchleys, sir.

- Fine. All four of the newest type. Perfect! They will be able to drive the boats away from our convoy. We don't have to worry about the RA convoy anymore. He is out of danger. But the JW convoy...

The admiral paused and bent over the map again, measuring the distances between the various formations and convoys.

"Convoy JW," continued Admiral Fraser, "is now entering the most dangerous zone south of Bear Island. If we break radio silence again, we risk giving away our presence. But our main task is to escort the convoy. Therefore, I order: firstly, give the convoy a radio so that it turns north - to the very border of the pack ice.

Lowering his voice, Sir Bruce explained his decision to the officers:

- It will be more difficult for Scharnhorst to detect the convoy on the new course.

The admiral paused, and then spoke again in an orderly tone:

"Second, Barnett's cruisers are to report their position immediately. The 17th Destroyer Flotilla guarding the convoy will also report their position. All clear?

- Yes, sir! replied the chief of staff, making quick notes in his notebook.

"Third," continued the commander, "inform everyone of our position, course, and speed. While all. Time?

The communications officer glanced at his watch.

— 04:10, sir.

Through the polar night, radiograms flew from the flagship battleship. Vice Admiral Barnett's cruisers and the Seventeenth Destroyer Flotilla responded immediately, giving

commander of his place. The snow storm intensified. From the falling thick flakes of snow, huge waves began to resemble moving snowdrifts, through which the battleship went like a giant snowplow.

At 06:28, the admiral ordered the convoy to take course forty-five, and Barnett's cruisers to approach the convoy to close support distance, interacting with the escort destroyers.

At 07:12 the cruisers turned on a course of two hundred and seventy degrees to approach the convoy from the south, while avoiding going at high speed against the wind blowing from the southwest.

At 08:15, having received data from the seventeenth flotilla on the position, course and speed of the convoy, Vice Admiral Barnett turned his three cruisers (Belfast, Norfolk and Sheffield) on a course of three hundred and five degrees, increasing speed to twenty-four nodes.

The impenetrable net in which they were going to catch the Scharnhorst had already been set.

IV

Throughout the night of 25/26 December, the Scharnhorst sailed north through a howling storm, escorted by five destroyers. Radar operators followed the beam as it scanned the screen, and hundreds of eyes peered out into the darkness from the combat posts on the upper deck.

The snowballs completely blocked visibility, the sky was as black as the sea, and even the destroyer escorts were barely visible. The icy wind of storm force made it unbearable to stay at open combat posts, the splashes of the waves, freezing on the fly, dug into the skin of the face with thousands of sharp needles. The icy optics of rangefinders made them practically unusable. Therefore, it was possible to rely only on the operation of the radar. The two radars available on the Scharnhorst could, within their limited range, detect the approach of the enemy, but, unlike the British, the so-called "Rotterdam apparatus", were not able to determine the size and even approximately the type of any detected ship or vessel.

But still, the Scharnhorst commander believed in the reliability and qualifications of his signalmen and in their ability to operate effectively in any weather. Signalers on German warships had always been first-class, and now they were also equipped with night vision binoculars.

The commander, dressed in a fur jacket and covering his face with a thick woolen scarf, himself could not see anything from the bridge through the dense veil of flying snow. From under this curtain of snow, only giant black waves appeared, which crashed against the ship with a roar and noise and crashed against the breakwaters and bow gun turrets. But at the control posts, behind the tightly closed doors, soft light streamed, it was warm and

there was almost complete silence.

Admiral Bey and his staff officers analyzed the situation according to radiograms received by the battleship.

Even at the exit from the fjord to the open sea on the Scharnhorst, a message was received from the commander of the submarine flotilla, who reported that eight boats of his flotilla were deployed on the proposed route of the convoy.

At 19:52 the submarines were ordered to use every opportunity, regardless of

storm, to launch torpedo attacks on detected targets. A little later, the commander of one of the boats, Ober-Lieutenant Dunkelberg, reported that he managed to fire a torpedo from the stern tube at the detected enemy destroyer, but the torpedo missed the target.

At about 21:00, a radio message was received from the commander of the air unit from the island of Lafontaine. He reported that aerial reconnaissance carried out during the day by an aircraft equipped with a radar failed to detect either the convoy itself or its security forces.

Thus, the Luftwaffe lost contact with the convoy.

At 11:40 p.m., forty-five minutes after the formation had passed Point Lucy, one of the communications officers appeared in the pilothouse.

- Where is the commander? - he asked.

"Ahead, with the watch officer," a voice answered from the darkness, and someone's invisible hand took the radio operator by the elbow and led him to the commander.

"Two urgent radiograms," the liaison officer reported. "One of them is from the Grand Admiral.

- Wow! Captain Ginze was surprised. "Hasn't he gone to bed yet?" Let's see what the Grand Admiral has to tell us.

The commander lit a blue camouflage flashlight and read Doenitz's radiogram.

"So," he said. "Who is the second radio message from?"

From the commander of the submarine flotilla, Commodore Eisenbart, captain of the first rank! - the radio operator reported, giving a radiogram to the commander.

The commander of the flotilla reported to the Scharnhorst about the search in various squares, which are led by his eight submarines.

"Thank you," Ginze said, dismissing the communications officer.

Grand Admiral Doenitz's radio message said:

"(A). The convoy you are about to destroy is carrying weapons for the Russians to use against our heroic army on the Eastern Front. We are obliged to help.

(b). Attack the convoy with all your forces (Scharnhorst and destroyers).

(c). Skillfully and boldly use the tactical situation. Do not interrupt the fight until at least partial success is achieved. The best chance of success is the Scharnhorst's firepower, so all of the battleship's artillery must be committed to combat. Destroyers should be deployed accordingly.

(d). If you encounter heavy enemy ships, leave, interrupting the battle under any circumstances. Otherwise, use common sense.

(e). Inform the crew about the tasks of the operation. I fully rely on you.

Heil und Sieg!

Doenitz, Grossadmiral.

After thinking, the captain of the first rank Ginze decided to read out the radiogram of the commander-in-chief on the ship's broadcast tomorrow at 04:00, at the time of the change of watch.

In the early hours of December 26, new radiograms began to arrive.

At 00:28 a message came again from the commander of the air unit of Lafontaine Island, who reported that the day before, December 25, his planes were tracking from 13:43 to 16:25 for a far-stretched column of merchant ships.

The next radiogram, received at 00:51, spoke of a BY-138 type flying boat, which had contact with the convoy on the same day from 12:25 to 15:10. No aircraft indicated the exact composition of the convoy, but the flying boat reported that it did not find any ships of covering and guarding within fifty miles of the convoy. None of the reports indicated the location of the convoy.

Captain of the first rank Ginze carefully studied both radiograms and did not hide his irritation.

"How does it happen," the commander of the Scharnhorst was indignant, "that such important messages arrive so late?" The reconnaissance planes made contact with the enemy yesterday at noon, and we receive their messages twelve hours later! Who can explain it?

- This is completely inexplicable, - the senior navigator of the battleship agreed. - I'm not talking about the fact that they did not even bother to determine the place of the convoy!

- Has the command received a response to our radiogram regarding the destroyers? Ginze asked the communications officer.

"No, sir captain of the first rank," replied the head of the communications service. "I will immediately report when the answer comes.

It was about a radiogram that Rear Admiral Bey sent to the headquarters of the naval group "North" at 23:55:

"In the operational area, a storm with a force of up to eight points. Destroyer firepower has been severely compromised. The speed is dropping."

Rear Admiral Bey had serious doubts about the combat effectiveness of the fourth destroyer flotilla in such weather conditions and requested command on this matter, without even finding out the opinion of the commander of the destroyer flotilla, Captain First Rank Johannesson.

Even more surprising is that with this radio message, Rear Admiral Bey broke the radio silence, which was so necessary for the implementation of the operation that was to be carried out by the Scharnhorst.

It is quite possible that it was on this radio signal that the British located the location of the Scharnhorst. In any case, just three hours after the transmission of this radio message by the Scharnhorst, the British Admiralty informed Admiral Fraser that the Scharnhorst was supposedly at sea. Although it is possible, of course, that the British could have learned about this from the Norwegian partisans.

The answer from the headquarters of the naval group "North" was received on the "Scharnhorst" at about three in the morning:

"If the destroyers can't stay at sea, consider the possibility of completing the task on your own with the Scharnhorst. Do as you please."

Now the admiral decided to request the opinion of the commander of the destroyer flotilla on this matter.

The captain of the first rank, Johannesson, transmitted a visual signal to the Scharnhorst: "So far there are no particular difficulties, but the situation remains problematic. We expect the weather to improve."

Half an hour later, at 03:27, a radiogram was received from Lieutenant Dunkelberg, the commander of one of the submarines combing the sea in search of a convoy. Dunkelberg reported:

"In the AB 6642 square, he was forced to dive, having discovered cover forces. The south wind is seven points, the state of the sea is six or seven points, visibility is one thousand five hundred meters.

Having received the radiogram, the captain of the first rank Ginze went down to the navigation cabin, where Dunkelberg's data were mapped. The navigator of the battleship, captain of the third rank Lanz, showed the commander a place on the map:

"They are here, Commander. I paved the way for the convoy, starting from the very first reports, and this report confirms everything exactly.

After listening to the report of the navigator, the captain of the first rank Ginze returned to his chair on bridge.

The time was approaching four o'clock in the morning.

The commander ordered the ship's broadcast microphone to be brought to him. The intra-ship broadcast system transmitted a special signal, calling on all posts to attention.

Ginze took the microphone:

The commander is speaking. A radiogram was received from the commander-in-chief: "Destroy the convoy at any cost in order to improve the situation on the Eastern Front. Doenitz, Grand Admiral.

All over the ship at combat posts, people looked at each other, smiling, full of self-confidence: "Of course! We will do it!"

Then there was silence again.

At 04:00 there was a change of watch. The replacements rested without undressing near their combat posts. Few were able to sleep.

At this time the Scharnhorst and her destroyers were about one hundred and fourteen miles southwest of Bear Island. At 04:23, Rear Admiral Bey ordered to lie down on a course of thirty degrees, and after half an hour he returned to a course of four degrees.

Rear Admiral Bey, whose staff led the flagship laying of the convoy route, comparing his map with the map of the battleship's navigators, said to the captain of the first rank Ginze:

"If the convoy continues on this course, and we continue on ours, then at 06:30 we will be only thirty miles from it.

Ginze agreed with this, but remarked:

"It's bad that visibility is dropping all the time.

"There's nothing to help," the admiral shrugged. Let's hope for our radars.

The admiral leaned over the map again, fiddled with the compass and protractor for a bit, then scribbled a few words on the form of the radio message and handed it to the liaison officer.

- Transmit this at 07:00 to Z-29.

It was an order from the fourth destroyer flotilla to form at 07:00 in front formation and comb the sea ahead of the battleship, traveling at a speed of ten knots on a course of two hundred and fifty degrees. The Scharnhorst was to remain about ten miles behind them.

An hour later, at 07:55, Rear Admiral Bey ordered the destroyers by radio to change course to two hundred and thirty degrees.

At the same time, the order was given over the ship's broadcast to prepare for battle. Reports of readiness quickly followed, and the senior officer, Captain Second Rank Dominic, reported to the commander that the ship was ready for battle.

Then it was announced on the broadcast that the destroyers were conducting reconnaissance in a westerly direction.

Now everyone on the ship knew that five large destroyers, each with a displacement of almost two thousand tons, were scouring the sea like huge rakes in search of prey.

The Scharnhorst followed them.

But the destroyers had a very hard time. On their new westerly course, they were caught right in the teeth of a ferocious hurricane. A huge oncoming wave covered them completely from bow to stern. The decks and superstructures quickly iced over, almost nothing was visible through the snowstorm. In such conditions, night binoculars were useless.

The gunners at the guns, with frostbitten and frost-covered faces, in icy uniforms, could hardly keep their feet in those incredible somersaults that the ships made, risking every minute to be washed overboard. In this case, only the upper tank art installation could act.

At 09:20 from the flagship destroyer "Z-29" with the help of radar, and a little later and visually, they found a ship on the right bow, going in a parallel course at a distance of thirty cables. The destroyer "Z-30", which was on the starboard beam, also reported on the sighted ship and assumed that it was an enemy ship.

At 09:35 the unknown ship, previously seen only as a vague silhouette, became clearly visible and gave its call sign. It became clear to the flotilla commander that this was one of his own destroyers, Z-38, which had strayed off course, having gone far to the north.

Realizing his mistake, the ship was now returning to its place in the ranks. The captain of the first rank, Johannesson, had already managed to report to the Scharnhorst about the discovery of an unknown ship, and now he gave a new radio to the battleship, confessing to a mistake.

In the midst of all this confusion, the destroyers saw flashes of flares about twelve miles astern.

In the Arctic, the shooting of illuminating projectiles resembles the appearance and disappearance in the space between the sea and the sky of many yellow-gold solar disks.

The firing of lighting projectiles continued from 09:20 to 09:30. The destroyers were sure that these suns were lit over the Scharnhorst, which meant that the enemy had discovered the battleship.

Half an hour later, all the destroyers received a radiogram from the Scharnhorst, which said:

- "Square AC 4133 under fire from enemy cruisers."

The coordinates given in this radiogram caused some confusion on board the destroyer Z-29, since it turned out that the Scharnhorst was not ten, but fifty miles east of the destroyers.

(A later investigation showed that an error occurred either in the transmission or reception of this radiogram, because instead of indicating the square AC 4199, as apparently was in the original radiogram, the square AC 4133 was erroneously indicated.)

In turn, on board the Scharnhorst, Captain 1st Rank Johannesson's erroneous report about the discovery of an enemy destroyer forced Captain 1st Rank Ginze to announce over the ship's broadcast:

"Radiogram from the destroyers: they entered the battle with the enemy!"

This message, although erroneous, electrified everyone aboard the battleship. The officers and sailors at all combat posts huddled with tension, expecting every minute the appearance of enemy ships, and possibly the convoy itself.

But something happened that was least expected.

V

All day on December 26, Chief Petty Officer Willi Gedde was on duty as a signalman at the forward searchlight on the port side. Signal searchlights were installed at all corners of the bridge behind the armored fire control post. Chief Petty Officer Gedde could not change from watch for even a minute, since the foreman who was supposed to replace him, according to the combat schedule, was almost non-stop in tower "B", where he was a gunner. With the help of a telephone and headphones, Gedde was in constant communication with the command of the battleship. He heard everything that was said in the pilothouse and discussed on the bridge.

Suddenly, at 09:20, a huge column of water, at least three meters in diameter, rose above the sea about five hundred meters from the ship - right on the beam of the bridge. Almost simultaneously, several more similar pillars grew up - ghostly pale, somehow not quite real, but clearly visible even through the snowy veil.

"Explosions from shells. Not less than eight inches," the chief sergeant-major had time to think, grabbing the phone.

And then the silent Scharnhorst immediately came to life.

The forward radar station reported on the enemy. Loud bells sounded. Gedde heard the report of rangefinders reporting the distance to the enemy, the sharp sounds of commands and terrible thunder, when sheaves of flame and powder smoke burst from all three barrels of the main caliber "C" turret. But this was not a battle with a convoy, but with some enemy warships, the first to open fire on the Scharnhorst.

The distant rumble of guns rumbled over the sea, and the night was lit up by flashes of gunshots. On the port side, on a bearing of two hundred and forty-five degrees, tongues of red-orange flame were beating out of the darkness. Gedde clearly saw the flakes of snow swirling in a crazy dance against the background of these flashes, and after the second salvo of the Scharnhorst, he again heard the distant thunder of the enemy's guns.

At some point, the Chief Petty Officer was blinded by a wall of flame from the fire of his own guns.

"Scharnhorst" and almost suffocated in the caustic fumes of powder gases that enveloped the ship in a warm cloud. Then Gedde pressed his eyes to the powerful binoculars, trying to see who was firing at them, but could make out nothing but the flashes of guns. He could not even tell exactly how many enemy ships were there in the darkness: one, two or three. But one thing was certain: the ship striking the Scharnhorst out of the darkness was a heavy cruiser armed with eight-inch artillery.

Over the Scharnhorst, illuminating shells began to explode, which, apparently, were fired by another ship, illuminating the target for the heavy cruiser. The battle lasted fifteen minutes - until 09:40. Whether hitting the enemy was achieved in this case was impossible to determine. Shortly after opening fire, the Scharnhorst lay on a course of one hundred and fifty degrees, turning almost completely to the opposite course, increasing her speed to thirty knots. His task was to destroy the convoy.

Fighting in complete darkness (dawn came around 11:00) with enemy cruisers, probably with torpedo weapons, would not contribute to the main task. It was now clear to Rear Admiral Bey that the British cruisers were going south of the convoy, and if they did not cling to the Scharnhorst like a pack of watchdogs, then he could, bypassing them, break through to the convoy ships and complete his combat mission. The convoy was clearly somewhere nearby, north of the line of cruisers.

But it was not possible to get out of the battle without receiving hits. First, a report was received from the commander of the 150-millimeter artillery mount No. III on the left side about a shell hit between the gun and the torpedo tube. Fortunately, the projectile did not explode. It broke through the upper deck and was found in compartment No. K in the living quarters of the fourth division.

Then another report followed:

"Attention! The radar on Fore-Mars was out of order. Direct hit in foremars. There are dead and wounded among the calculations of anti-aircraft guns.

Fragments from this shell hit the small open platform on which Chief Petty Officer Gedde was sitting, but by some miracle did not hit him. Gedde heard a report of two hits, as well as a fire on the living deck from an unexploded ordnance. The fire was soon extinguished.

When the Scharnhorst departed, the captain of the first rank Ginze ordered a smoke screen to be put up, which soon covered the battleship with a dense wall of white smoke. A few minutes later, the ship broadcast announced:

"We have withdrawn from the battle and are again trying to enter the convoy. We are from the north, the destroyers are from the south."

At this time, the artillery conductor Wibbelshof and the foremen of other towers were ordered to arrive on the bridge to the senior artillery officer.

Conductor Wibbelshof, who had more than fifteen years of service in the Navy, controlled the fire of the auxiliary caliber guns on the port side. After a while the conductor returned, and everyone stared at him inquiringly.

"Things are bad, guys," Wibbelshof announced. "The bow radar is covered.

True, the stern still remained intact, but the old-time gunners, who remembered the raids in the Atlantic, knew well the price of the radar in raiding operations.

"It's like going blind in one eye," the conductor muttered. "All right. Let's try to get by with one fodder.

On the Scharnhorst, of course, they had no idea that the British radars, unlike the German ones, were already so perfect that they literally turned night into day. Having lost its forward radar, the Scharnhorst began to resemble a blind man who had to fight with an enemy who could see right through him, from whose eyes neither darkness, nor a snow storm, nor a smoke screen could hide.

At 08:40, the radar of the light cruiser Belfast, Vice Admiral Barnett's flagship, detected the Scharnhorst at a distance of thirty-five thousand yards. At this time, the tenth cruiser squadron was rushing at full speed to approach the convoy, which was still forty-eight miles to the north. "Scharnhorst" at that moment was only thirty

six miles from the convoy.

At 09:10, British radars detected another object, which could not be precisely determined. It could have been some ship that had lagged behind the convoy, or it could have been a destroyer from the Scharnhorst escort, looking for ways to approach the convoy. As a result, the second "echo" was decided to be ignored, since the cruisers were preparing to attack the Scharnhorst.

Vice Admiral Barnett ordered to approach the German battleship. At 09:24 Belfast opened fire with illuminating shells, and five minutes later the heavy cruiser Norfolk fired a side salvo at the Scharnhorst from four twin eight-inch turrets. The heavy cruiser fired on the enemy until 09:40. In the second and third salvos, the British observed direct hits on the Scharnhorst. The light cruisers Belfast and Sheffield did not fire on the German battleship. When the Scharnhorst began to retreat, increasing the distance between itself and the English cruisers, the Norfolk ceased fire and led the squadron south in pursuit of the enemy.

At 09:55, the Scharnhorst turned to the northeast, and it became clear to Admiral Barnett that the enemy planned to bypass his cruisers, taking up a position between him and the convoy. Since the Scharnhorst was sailing at a speed of thirty knots, and the English cruisers could only go against the wave at twenty-four knots, Barnett decided to "cut the corner" in order to have time to wedge with his cruisers between the convoy and the Scharnhorst. He knew that the radars of his cruisers would detect the Scharnhorst again at the right time, and therefore, without hesitation, he ordered a change in course, losing radar contact with the enemy at 10:20.

The latest reports indicated that the Scharnhorst was thirty-six thousand yards away and was heading northeast. Sheltered by a smoke screen, the Scharnhorst began to retreat at full speed in a southerly direction. When, by all indications, contact with the British cruisers was lost, Rear Admiral Bey gradually began to turn to the northeast.

The plan of the German admiral was clearly calculated. Using the Scharnhorst's speed advantage, he could flank the enemy, catching him completely by surprise. The only thing that Rear Admiral Bay and his Chief of Staff did not take into account was the outstanding range performance of the British radars - the famous "Rotterdam apparatus".

At 10:00 a message came from the submarine of Lieutenant Commander Lubsen, who reported on the location of the convoy: "Convoy, 09:45, in square AB 6365." This meant that the convoy was forty miles northwest of the German destroyers.

Nine minutes later Rear Admiral Bey ordered the Fourth Destroyer Flotilla to report on the operational situation.

Z-29 beeped back:

"Following plan accordingly, square AC 4413, heading two hundred and thirty, speed twelve knots."

At 10:25 another radiogram came from Lieutenant Commander Lubsen:

"Spotted the convoy at 09:30. The location of the convoy has not been determined."

This report prompted the commander of the destroyer flotilla, Captain First Rank Johannesson, to think about whether to continue, according to the order received, his reconnaissance mission or attack the convoy on his own?

He was brought out of a state of uncertainty by a new radiogram from the Scharnhorst, received at 10:27 and containing the order of Rear Admiral Bey: "Fourth destroyer flotilla: heading seventy degrees, speed twenty-five knots!"

Half an hour later, another radiogram came from the admiral, requesting the location, course and speed of the flotilla. Johannesson replied that his destroyers were deployed in front for thirty miles, taking up assigned positions to comb the region.

Unfortunately, the expectations of the flotilla commander regarding the improvement of the weather did not come true. Low clouds, driven by a southwestern hurricane, and a snow storm that continued for several hours uninterruptedly did not improve visibility, although a gloomy polar dawn was already setting in.

At 11:35, the Scharnhorst was ordered to change course again - by thirty degrees, and a few minutes later they showed their place again, reporting by radiogram that the ship was heading zero degrees at a speed of twenty-seven knots. For those who accepted it, this meant that the battleship was currently about fifty miles northeast of the destroyers on the northern course.

At 11:58, Rear Admiral Bey gave the order to the destroyers:

"Act against square 6365!"

It was an order, based on information from Lieutenant Commander Lubsen, to attack the convoy.

Having received the order, the captain of the first rank Johannesson at 12:17 turned the destroyer "Z-29" on a course of two hundred and eighty degrees and increased speed. All other destroyers were ordered by visual and radio signals to follow the flotilla commander into the attack.

VI

The dark polar night gave way to a dull gray dawn. The storm and snowstorm intensified. On the Scharnhorst, all combat posts were in a state of full combat readiness.

Rear Admiral Bey was on the battleship's bridge, wrapped in a fur coat with the collar turned up. Next to him stood Captain First Rank Ginze, his hands in the pockets of his fur raglan. The ship, going sideways to the wave, swayed violently. The senior artillery officer, captain of the third rank, Bredenbrücker, did not leave the rangefinder of the main fire control post.

Shortly after 11:00, the navigation officer appeared on the bridge, handing the commander a blank radiogram:

- Report from a reconnaissance aircraft, Captain First Rank.

Ginze took one hand out of his raglan pocket and took the form.

"Great," he said. "How do they manage to fly in this weather?"

After reading the text, the battleship commander frowned in concern and turned to the admiral:

"Not good news, Herr Admiral. Look.

Rear Admiral Bey took the radio message. Its content was indeed disturbing enough. Far out to sea, northwest of the North Cape, about one hundred and fifty miles west of the Scharnhorst, five warships were found.

"Let's go and see where they are exactly," said the admiral, heading for the pilothouse.

The senior navigator of the battleship, captain of the third rank Lanz, has already marked this place on the map, pointing to it with a pencil:

— This is the point, Mr. Admiral.

Rear Admiral Bey glanced at the map.

"I think," he said, "that it can only be some new enemy task force: one or two heavy ships with conventional guards.

The admiral was silent, and everyone else was silent, waiting for the commander to say. Long years of commanding destroyers taught the admiral to make quick decisions. Glancing at the map again, Rear Admiral Bey said to the battleship commander:

"Keep on the same course, Ginze. We must get that damned convoy by all means!

Captain of the first rank Ginze put his hand to the visor of his cap:

- Yawol, Herr Admiral!

The admiral pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, took one himself and offered it to the commander. Chief Petty Officer Yurgens, modestly standing at the bulkhead, handed the admiral a burning lighter. The commander greedily puffed on tobacco smoke and offered a cigarette to Jurgens. The commander and commander of the battleship then returned to the bridge.

"Ginze," said the admiral, "make sure that only first-class signalmen are at the observation posts. Everything now depends on them.

"Yes," answered the captain of the first rank Ginze, giving the necessary orders. Signalmen were ordered to increase their surveillance.

Signal Sergeant Gedde, who was constantly on duty at the port searchlight, heard the voice of the commander in his headphones. It was 11:30.

The commander spoke not over the ship's broadcast, but over the artillery communications line:

"Attention to all posts. The captain of the ship is speaking. Situation report. In the morning, as expected, we came into contact with the convoy security forces, which consisted of three enemy cruisers. We have changed course and are now trying to reach the convoy from the other side - from the north. We have damaged the enemy cruisers and they have been driven back.

The Luftwaffe has given us an important message from aerial reconnaissance. An English task force, consisting of heavy ships, has been detected one hundred and fifty miles to the west of us. I repeat, one hundred and fifty miles to the west. It is still far from us, and we continue to make our way to the convoy. End of message.

Gedde nodded his head. He was pleased. He liked the manner of the ship's commander to always keep subordinates informed of the situation. This was far from a general rule, as far as he knew from sailors who served on other ships ...

Soon Gedde heard another report from the aft radar post of contact with the enemy. The siren howled, calling for attention at all combat posts.

At 12:21 Gedda thought he saw shadows to the right and left of his nose. He soon became convinced that it did not seem to him, and reported:

"There are three shadows on the right and left of the nose!"

In his headphones, the signal foreman heard similar reports coming from other posts. From the central fire control post, commands were sent to the main caliber towers. At that moment, the distant shadows flashed with flashes of cannon fire. Muffled explosions sounded in the air above the Scharnhorst, and a bright yellow light suddenly illuminated the battleship, momentarily blinding Gedde.

Three or four yellow-white suns hovered over the Scharnhorst, illuminating its deck and superstructure with their rays. The roofs of the three-gun turrets, the long barrels of the guns, the tiers of bridges, and the massive chimney of the Scharnhorst were visible in blinding light through the snow charge. The enemy again opened fire with illuminating shells, and almost simultaneously huge columns of water rose over the sea very close to the battleship.

A moment later, both bow towers of the main caliber of the Scharnhorst opened fire on enemy ships located on the starboard side. The fight resumed. Standing on the open bridge, Rear Admiral Bey watched the enemy fire. The commander and senior artilleryman were in the conning tower. The admiral went to the open door of the conning tower and ordered the commander:

- Turn left! We're getting out of the shelling!
- Yawol, Herr Admiral! - Ginze reported and gave the order:
- Port full speed ahead. New rate one hundred thirty-five. Chief gunner, rudder set to port!

Quickly picking up speed, the Scharnhorst, listing heavily to starboard, turned to the east, thereby bringing the aft turret of the main caliber into battle on the second and third volleys. Two volleys were also fired by 150-millimeter guns, controlled by the second gunner, Lieutenant Commander Whiting.

Chief Petty Officer Gedde saw how, after the third or fourth salvo, a great fire broke out on one of the British ships, whose silhouette was now clearly visible. Another English cruiser also experienced a severe fire in the bow. A plume of black smoke rose from the ship.

The captain of the third rank, Bredenbrücker, managed to announce hits on enemy ships between volleys, and then the 11-inch guns of the Scharnhorst fired the next volley. The columns of water raised by the shells of the Scharnhorst rose higher than the masts of the British cruisers. Gedde noted that almost every Scharnhorst salvo in English

the cruisers were covered.

The Scharnhorst, meanwhile, took an easterly course, leaving the British cruisers to the left astern and continuing to fire on them. It seemed to Gedda that one of the enemy cruisers had again been hit in the bow, above which a large wall of flame had risen. The signal foreman noticed that the enemy fire, which at first seemed very accurate, lost its former accuracy under the return fire of the Scharnhorst, although this time the distance was much shorter than in the previous case. After twenty minutes of battle, the enemy ships completely disappeared in a shroud of snow and rain.

At 12:41 the British ceased fire. A quarter of an hour later, the all-clear alarm was broken on the Scharnhorst and an order was given to report on the damage received. It turned out that the battleship did not receive any hits in this skirmish.

In the meantime, the crew took advantage of a break in the battle to put the ship in order. Copper cases for powder charges were collected or thrown overboard. The towers turned to the wind to ventilate the powder gases accumulated there. Ammunition was supplied to the guns from the cellars.

The admiral discussed the situation with the commander of the battleship and the officers of his headquarters.

"Don't worry," the Admiral muttered. "That way we'll never get to the convoy at all. Their cruisers will always be on our way. I believe that these are the same cruisers with which we exchanged fire in the morning. What do you think, Ginze?"

- It seems that this is so, - the commander of the Scharnhorst agreed. - The artilleryman thinks the same. We couldn't see the ships themselves, but judging by the splashes, we had one heavy cruiser and two light cruisers standing in our way all the time.

"We are constantly being watched," the admiral continued. "I see no point in a third attempt to break through to the convoy. Everything will repeat, as in the first two. We should not forget about the connection that comes from the west.

Rear Admiral Bey bent over the map, measured the distance to the coast of northern Norway, looked at the course and speed indicators, and then at the commander of the Scharnhorst:

We're going back to Norway. In Alta Fjord. What is the course?

Captain of the third rank Lantz, having conjured with a parallel ruler and a protractor, drew a line on the map with a pencil:

"One hundred and fifty-five degrees, Herr Admiral!"

The commander turned to the captain of the first rank Ginze:

"Commander, heading one hundred and fifty-five degrees, speed twenty-eight knots. You can announce to the crew that we are returning to base. Thank you gentlemen.

Over the next few minutes, the Scharnhorst turned on its new course.

Now the storm has become oncoming. The short twilight of the polar day was again replaced by the pitch darkness of the night that enveloped the ship. The signalmen continued to peer into the darkness, but saw nothing. Apparently, Rear Admiral Bey, after the second unsuccessful attempt to break through to the convoy, decided to return to Norway so as not to be cut off from the base by the British formation approaching from the west. Since all reports indicated that at least one of the five ships of this formation was a battleship, the order of the commander-in-chief came into force, prohibiting combat with heavy enemy ships.

At 13:45 - after the end of the second battle with the British cruisers - the fourth flotilla received an unsigned order by radio:

"The 4th Destroyer Flotilla to abort the operation and withdraw from the combat area."

On the destroyer "Z-30" they came to the conclusion that the signature of "Scharnhorst" was given in a distorted form, and possibly forged.

As for the commander of the flotilla, the captain of the first rank Johannesson, quite naturally, this order seemed completely incomprehensible. Firstly, he did not understand whether this only concerned the last order to attack the convoy in accordance with the data received from Lubsen's submarine, or whether the entire operation was stopped?

Johannesson radioed the admiral for clarification, and at 14:20 received a response from the Scharnhorst: "Return to base!"

The reason why the admiral released the destroyers remained not entirely clear. Possibly, the commander's decision was influenced by the weather conditions and the large excessive consumption of fuel on the destroyers.

The flotilla commander, of course, obeyed the order, turned the destroyers to the south and went to Point Lucy at a speed of twelve knots.

Arriving at the collection point of his ships, Captain First Rank Johannesson discovered that the destroyer Z-33 was missing, which did not report anything about itself until 03:30. At 18:40, numerous radio messages brought the first reports that the Scharnhorst was fighting a British battleship.

It is not known why these radio messages reached the destroyers only two hours and sixteen minutes after their transmission. Almost simultaneously, at 17:36, a radio message came from the headquarters of the naval group "North":

"16:56, according to the enemy, the English battleship is on course twenty. Distance six miles, heading one hundred and twenty."

This message was an interception of a radio message from Admiral Frazer, who showed at 16:56 the place of his connection. The radio interception service of the North group received this signal, and within forty minutes it was decoded and handed over to the radio operator at 17:36 for transmission to the Scharnhorst.

Returning to the Norwegian coast, the destroyers received a radiogram from the Scharnhorst, transmitted at 18:19, when an artillery duel was already underway between the Scharnhorst and the Duke of York. It said:

"Using radar guidance, the enemy fires from a distance of nineteen thousand two hundred meters."

This message came as a surprise to all departments of the German fleet, since it demonstrated the clear superiority of British radar, which was known to only a few specialists in Germany.

At 19:11, all eight submarines operating along the convoy's route were ordered to immediately move at full speed to AC 4940, where the Scharnhorst was located.

Soon the headquarters of the North group informed Rear Admiral Bey that "submarines and destroyers were ordered to proceed at full speed to the battle area." Haven't received any direct yet

orders, the commander of the fourth flotilla immediately turned his ships on the opposite course and went to the battle area. But as soon as he gave the corresponding order to the flotilla and laid a course for the square indicated in the radiogram of the North group, another order was received from the headquarters of the naval group in the Z-29 radio room:

"Follow from the coast to the Scharnhorst battle area in square AC 4677. Give your position in a short coded signal."

The fourth flotilla changed course one hundred and forty degrees and then one hundred and fifty degrees towards the North Cape, gradually increasing her speed to twenty-seven knots.

As ordered, the captain of the first rank Johannesson announced his position with a short coded signal.

Storm waves now hit the destroyers directly from the beam, knocking them off course and swaying them terribly. The destroyers already knew that the Scharnhorst would be drawn into battle with a strong enemy formation, which included a battleship. This meant that other British ships were also taking part in the battle, possibly cruisers from guarding the battleship, as well as cruisers that the Scharnhorst had encountered twice the day before, and, of course, a large number of destroyers. Scharnhorst could not fight back against such a combination of enemy forces. Therefore, going, despite the weather, at full speed, the destroyers hurried to the aid of their fighting comrades.

Will they be able to arrive on time?

Will they be able to help in any way?

Falling from side to side, the destroyers made their way forward in complete darkness through the most severe storm. The radio operators tried in vain to contact the Scharnhorst, and its silence already seemed like an ominous omen...

The destroyers had been on a new course for about an hour, when at 12:13 they received a new order from the headquarters of the naval group "North":

"Stop the operation immediately. Avoid contact with the enemy. Follow to the Skerry Islands.

The flotilla turned around and moved at full speed towards the coast, which was detected by radar at a distance of two hundred miles at 23:30. On December 27, at 01:50, the destroyers entered the skerries through the Kval-Sund. At 03:50 a radio was received from the missing destroyer Z-33 that it had passed Point Lucy at 01:20. At about ten o'clock in the morning the fourth flotilla anchored in the Kaa-fjord near the battleship Tirpitz.

The destroyer operation was over.

On the Scharnhorst, the in-ship broadcast again started working, bringing the voice of the commander to all combat posts and compartments:

- We fought with three enemy cruisers, with the same as in the morning. As many of you have seen, the British ships got a lot of good hits. The admiral ordered the destroyers to return to base. As the weather gets worse, we also return to the base and are now heading for the coast of Norway.

At 15:00, the senior officer announced on the broadcast that the crew could have lunch without leaving places.

Chief Petty Officer Gedde hadn't eaten anything all day. No one brought him food, but leave your

Gedde's post could not. The headphones constantly heard reports from the aft radar post that some enemy ship was tracking the Scharnhorst. From time to time the distance to this ship was reported.

Gedde endured for a long time, but in the end, hunger took its toll, and he reported by phone:

- Chief Petty Officer Gedde - post at the left bow searchlight - requests a change for a few minutes for a meal.

From the management post immediately replied:

— The change is directed. Go to the galley as soon as possible.

Gedde was relieved and ran across the icy deck to the galley. There he met about fifteen people like him, urgently replaced sailors and foremen. Of course, they immediately began to discuss the situation. Some, apparently, did not hear the speech of the commander. One asked Hedde:

- What's happened? Why are we returning?

Gedde himself was overwhelmed with strange, unsettling sensations.

It seemed to him that some kind of threat was hanging in the air. Whether this was some kind of premonition, he did not know, but he decided to return to his battle post as soon as possible. Quickly swallowing a few spoonfuls of soup, he did not answer the question and hurried back to his post. It was 15:20.

Putting on his headphones, Gedde heard the voice of a senior officer:

"To all combat posts. Report readiness after eating.

"Signalmen, step up surveillance!" came the command from the central artillery post.

The sea raged more and more, the scope of the pitching of the Scharnhorst increased.

In the tower of 150-millimeter guns on the port side, senior sailor Shtrater noted that several gunners had bouts of seasickness.

Outside, pitch darkness reigned, and the snowstorm, after a short break, raged with redoubled fury.

The British cruisers continued to follow the Scharnhorst.

At 10:24, Vice Admiral Barnett's 10th Cruiser Squadron rendezvoused with the convoy and the 36th Destroyer Squadron. Then the cruisers, ten miles ahead of the convoy, went in a zigzag, putting a screen of destroyers in front of them.

Toward noon, it became clear to Admiral Fraser that, due to lack of fuel, he would either need to turn back or go to refuel with the Russians in Severomorsk. If Scharnhorst had already turned back to base, then there was no chance of catching him.

At 11:55 Fraser ordered the convoy to lie on a course of one hundred and twenty-five degrees, that is, to take a little south, in order to make it easier for the cruisers to be between the convoy and the Scharnhorst.

At 11:57 the heavy cruiser Norfolk made radar contact with the Scharnhorst at twenty-seven thousand yards, but contact was lost a few minutes later.

Then, at 1205 hours, the light cruiser Belfast re-established contact, this time at thirty thousand five hundred yards.

Vice Admiral Barnett ordered the destroyers to stay on the starboard bow and lay on a course of one hundred degrees.

At 12:21 the light cruiser Sheffield signaled "I see the enemy!" and the cruisers opened fire from a distance of eleven thousand yards.

At the same time, the thirty-sixth destroyer division was ordered to launch a torpedo attack. However, due to bad weather, which greatly reduced their speed, the destroyers at this stage of the battle were unable to approach the Scharnhorst at a distance of an effective torpedo salvo. Moreover, Scharnhorst was leaving at full speed. Closest of all - at a distance of seven thousand yards - only the destroyer Musketeer could approach the German battleship, which at 12:22 opened fire on the Scharnhorst and continued firing for fourteen minutes.

At 12:33 Norfolk received a serious hit by a 280-mm shell on the barbette of the aft part of the "X" turret, which disabled the turret and forced, as a precaution, to flood its cellars. The second shell hit the middle of the ship, right behind the second pipe. All radar equipment of the cruiser, except for one type 284, failed. An officer and six sailors were killed, five sailors were seriously injured.

At the same time, a salvo of 11-inch shells hit the Sheffield, and fragments - some the size of a soccer ball - hit the side of the cruiser. Since the Scharnhorst was leaving at twenty-eight knots, the distance to her, which had been reduced to four or eight miles during the battle, became more and more.

Vice Admiral Barnett decided to cease fire and follow the Scharnhorst until it could be brought to Admiral Fraser's compound. The 10th Cruiser Squadron also increased speed to twenty-eight knots, and from 1250 hours the distance between the British and the Scharnhorst stabilized at thirteen thousand five hundred yards, sometimes increasing to twenty thousand yards, but no more. For the next three hours, the British cruisers continued their pursuit, keeping in wake formation and maintaining radar contact with the Scharnhorst at a distance of 7.5 miles beyond visual observation. The heavy cruiser Norfolk, despite the damage received, remained in the ranks of the squadron. At 16:03 he was forced to slow down to put out a fire that broke out in one of the onboard compartments, but at 17:00 he again entered the formation.

At 16:10, the Sheffield began to fall behind, reporting that she had suffered an accident with her port inboard propeller shaft and that she was forced to reduce her speed to ten knots for half an hour.

In his stowage cabin on the Duke of York, Admiral Fraser studied the enemy reports coming mainly from Vice Admiral Barnett. Connection 2 continued east with one goal: to intercept and destroy the Scharnhorst, thus eliminating the greatest threat to all polar convoys. Fifteen minutes after the Scharnhorst began the battle with Barnett's cruisers, a report was received on the bridge of the battleship Duke of York about the discovery of an enemy reconnaissance aircraft.

Admiral Fraser looked up from his charts and radio messages.

— German reconnaissance aircraft? the extremely surprised admiral asked again. "Where?"

"Eight and a half miles to starboard, sir," reported the officer from the radar post. - There are three of them. One appears to have radar as it emits radar pulses and transmits long radio messages.

The admiral and the chief of staff looked at each other.

- What else? Sir Bruce asked.

"Nothing yet, sir," the officer replied. "We're watching them."

Hours passed. The second battle between Barnett's cruisers and the Scharnhorst began.

Admiral Fraser wanted to know for sure whether the German destroyers were at Scharnhorst or not. In the morning, Barnett reported that there were none, and now confirmed: "Scharnhorst is acting alone, there are no destroyers with her." For about four hours, Duke of York radars monitored German reconnaissance aircraft, following the ships of the formation and constantly transmitting data on their course and speed. Then they disappeared from the screens: either contact was simply lost, or the enemy planes returned to base.

Watching the Scharnhorst's course plotting according to reports coming from Barnett's cruisers, Admiral Fraser became worried. Everything was going too well to be true. The Admiral ordered to double-check the data. There was no mistake. The Scharnhorst was heading straight for the Duke of York.

"If the Scharnhorst stays on this course," said Admiral Fraser, "she will cross our course at a distance of only thirteen thousand yards and come under the concentrated fire of the entire formation. I intend to attack it together with the Jamaica, and I will order the destroyers to launch a torpedo attack.

"It surprises me," said the chief of staff, "that such complete and accurate reports from German reconnaissance aircraft had no effect on the maneuvering of the Scharnhorst." He stubbornly continues to go the same course. If he continues to move in this way," the chief of staff glanced at his watch, "then the battle will begin at about 17:15.

Two hours later, at 16:17, Admiral Fraser, who was sitting in the wheelhouse on a steel swivel chair, like a spirit from the abyss, was approached by an officer from the main radar post:

We got him, sir! he announced to the commander. "Range forty-five thousand yards, bearing twenty degrees.

The chief of staff compared the data received using the radar with the laying, which was carried out according to the reports of Barnett's cruisers. Everything matched.

"Very well," said Admiral Fraser, jumping to his feet. - Flag Lieutenant! Transmit radar data and our position to all ships!

"Yes, sir," the flag lieutenant's voice answered from the darkness.

Exactly twenty minutes later, at 16:37, the destroyers received an order, breaking up into half divisions, to take the most advantageous positions for launching a torpedo attack on the right and left of the bow of the battleship. At that moment, the cruiser Belfast appeared on the radar of the Duke of York, overtaking the others in pursuit of the Scharnhorst. Five minutes earlier, the Duke of York's radar position had spotted the Scharnhorst at 29,700 yards. Sir Bruce ordered his flag lieutenant to call the ship's commander to the communication tube connecting the navigation bridge with the flagship.

When the captain of the first rank Russell reported that he was at the pipe, the admiral said to him:

"In two minutes, the connection will turn to heading eighty. Russell, you can start working on the main guns.

At 16:47 the cruiser Belfast opened fire with illuminating shells.

A minute later, at 16:48, the Duke of York also fired a salvo of illuminating shells, and at 16:50, in the darkness of the polar night, the first salvo of ten 14-inch guns of the British flagship thundered. Following the flagship, the Jamaica cruiser immediately opened fire, and a little later, the Norfolk and Belfast. The distance to the enemy was twelve thousand yards.

VII

While on duty at the forward port searchlight, Chief Petty Officer Gedde carefully watched the sea in his sector of observation. Suddenly, he heard another report from the aft radar post, which made Gedde even tear his eyes away from the eyepieces and listen carefully. Over the past two hours, data from the radar station have been constantly reporting data on British ships monitoring the Scharnhorst, and then unexpectedly they reported on some new target detected from the starboard side. The battleship commander demanded to report the distance and bearing of the new target. Gedde remembered that in his morning address to the crew, the commander had said something about a British formation located one hundred and fifty miles west of the Scharnhorst. In the course of business, the chief foreman completely forgot about this message, and now he remembered, peering anxiously into the darkness.

Three hours ago, the Scharnhorst turned to the south-easterly course, which was still going on. Gedde thought that the British formation, whose speed was no less than twenty-eight knots, receiving data on the speed and course of the Scharnhorst, could well intercept the Scharnhorst when it returned to base. Therefore, a new battle could begin at any moment. As if echoing his thoughts, the Scharnhorst sirens began to howl. It was 16:00.

In the two-gun 150-mm turret No. IV on the left side, the sailor Shtrater heard an appeal from the central control post about the appearance of some target from the starboard side. It is possible that the British cruisers, who had been following the Scharnhorst all day, pointed someone at him, and the battle could begin at any moment. Before the tower fully realized what had happened, the voice of the senior artillery officer rang out in the headphones: "Directly along the course of the shadow!"

And immediately then:

"Attention all combat posts! We're heading east!"

Rolling heavily, the Scharnhorst began a turn. The pitching was replaced by side. An order followed from the central artillery post:

"The crews of guns and machine guns go down! The enemy opened fire from the starboard side!"

Then something unimaginable began.

Chief Petty Officer Gedde observed giant columns of water that rose literally a hundred meters along the port side of the battleship. Such columns of water could rise from the fall of shells of the heaviest caliber. Scharnhorst, not yet completing the turn, also opened fire from the main battery guns. Gedde heard the voice of the second artilleryman, Lieutenant Commander Whiting, who ordered one of the guns of the starboard auxiliary caliber

fire an illuminating projectile between salvos of the main caliber in order to be able to visually determine the target. However, the senior gunner canceled this order, apparently not wanting to weaken the mine defense of the ship.

Meanwhile, the enemy shells that had fallen in a covering pattern from the starboard and port sides of the Scharnhorst now exploded in a wide spread far behind the battleship. Gedde anxiously peered into the darkness from the port side, trying to see the enemy. The height of the water columns indicated that powerful 14-inch shells were falling into the sea. One of these shells hit the bow of the starboard side of the Scharnhorst near the turret of the main caliber "A". The blast wave threw Gedde onto the deck. For several seconds, the chief foreman lay on the wooden flooring of the signal platform, unable to move, greedily gasping for fresh air. At that moment, the commander of the Scharnhorst appeared on the platform. A sailor appeared with him, wiping the lenses of his binoculars.

The captain of the first rank Ginze, seeing Gedde lying on the deck, went up to him and helped him up.

Are you hurt, Hedde?

Chief Sergeant overcame weakness:

"Not at all, sir captain of the first rank. Just stunned, but now I'm coming to my senses. The commander pointed to the binoculars.

"Stay at your post so that no one from this direction catches us by surprise.

Tower "A" jammed, and she was out of order. Shortly after the first defeat, a second shell hit the middle of the ship. Gedde heard a report to the senior artilleryman about the failure of tower "A":

"Fire and smoke make it difficult to get into the tower to find out the situation there. Tower connections No".

The remaining six 11-inch guns of the Scharnhorst continued to fire salvoes into the darkness, trying to find the enemy, who was at a distance of seventeen to twenty thousand meters. From the fore-mars they saw that the volleys covered the English ship - the shells were bursting at its very sides. The artillery duel lasted about twenty minutes. Both sides fired furiously at each other. During this period, a large number of lighting shells exploded over the Scharnhorst. The entire battleship—its massive superstructures, bridges, gun turrets, masts, and chimney—was bathed in an unnatural ghostly light that was at times bright pink and at other times blood red.

Listening to the new installations that were given to the artillery towers from the central artillery fire control post, Chief Petty Officer Gedde realized that the distance between the opponents had increased. The fire of both the Germans and the British noticeably weakened. The intervals between salvos became longer.

Since the Scharnhorst was fighting on the starboard side, the 150-millimeter twin-gun turret No. IV on the left side was inactive. There they even opened an escape hatch and watched how illuminating shells were bursting over the battleship with supernatural flashes.

At 16:50, the ship's broadcast broadcast the commander's message:

"To all combat posts. The enemy unit, unable to compete with us in speed, lagged behind.

After a short pause, the broadcast continued:

"Scharnhorst" ... confirmed its combat power. "

However, when the message was transmitted, the Scharnhorst guns were still firing at the enemy.

At the moment when the commander of the Scharnhorst happily announced to the entire crew of the battleship that the English formation, unable to develop an equal speed with the Scharnhorst, remained far behind the stern of the German battleship, the situation actually developed as follows: Duke of York and Jamaica "Went south of the Scharnhorst, still lying on an easterly course.

Behind the stern of the German battleship were the English destroyers Savage and Samarets on the left, and the Scorpion and Stord on the right. Vice Admiral Barnett's cruisers Belfast and Norfolk sailed north of Scharnhorst. And only the Sheffield, which had lost speed, did not take part in the battle. As for the thirty-sixth destroyer battalion, located northwest of the Scharnhorst, at 17:00 it also lay down on the course of pursuit of the German raider, trying to take the most favorable position for launching a torpedo attack from the northern direction. On the destroyer Musketeer, they tried to coordinate the attack with the destroyers covering the main forces, but an unexpected breakdown of the radio station made it impossible to establish contact with the destroyer Savage.

During the first phase of the battle, none of the English ships received any hits. The respite, which the captain of the first rank Ginze happily hastened to announce to the crew of the Scharnhorst, lasted only five to ten minutes. Then, over the Scharnhorst, the red glow of illuminating shells lit up again, and the heavy impact of an underwater explosion shook the entire ship. The speed immediately began to drop.

In tower number IV, they heard a message on the ship's broadcast:

"Torpedo hit in boiler room No. I on the starboard side. Speed eight knots.

The gunners heard that the auxiliary artillery on the starboard side was firing. Then, barely audible against the background of a terrible roar, anti-aircraft guns opened fire.

From the battle cellar of tower No. IV, a report came in about heavy smoke in the cellar room, and the conductor Wibbelshof ordered the gunners to put on gas masks. As soon as they had time to do this, they announced on the broadcast:

"The shell hit the battle cellar of the 150-millimeter turret No. I. All the guns were disabled. The crew of the cellar died.

The gunners of Tower No. IV calmly listened to this message. It seemed to them that they were present at the next exercises, where similar situations were repeatedly worked out. Therefore, they were not at all surprised when this message was followed by an order for the gunners of the 150-millimeter starboard turret to leave their combat post and gather below the upper deck for distribution to other combat posts and fire divisions. Similar things were also repeatedly practiced in the exercises.

At that moment, the Scharnhorst's main battery guns roared again. In turret No. IV they clearly heard the stern turret "C" firing along with the stern 150-millimeter guns. The sailors breathed a sigh of relief when a new message was broadcast over the broadcast:

"To all battle posts: we give twenty-two knots again!"

Silently, they blessed their comrades, who are now on duty at the boilers, at the turbines ...

Chief Petty Officer Gedde, who continued to keep watch at his post at the forward searchlight, heard from his headphones reports on the maneuvering of enemy ships that came to the central post. Constantly new English ships appeared out of the darkness. These were destroyers going on a torpedo attack. At first they were seen in the form of vague shadows, then their vague silhouettes began to emerge more clearly. Finally, the destroyers became clearly visible, following directly in the wake of the Scharnhorst. Others appeared from the starboard side. Gedde understood this from the firing of the 150-mm starboard guns, which were echoed by anti-aircraft guns with a characteristic bark.

All this time, lighting shells practically did not go out over the Scharnhorst, pulling it out of the saving darkness. Lighting projectiles were fired from all sides. Then Gedde heard good news for everyone - Scharnhorst again managed to increase the maximum speed to twenty-two knots. Half an hour after the start of the first artillery duel, it seemed to Admiral Frazer that the Scharnhorst still had a chance to leave. Everything now depended on the four destroyers of the "C" type, that is, on the two half-divisions included in the protection of the battleship "Duke of York".

At 17:31 they were ordered to launch a torpedo attack, and Sir Bruce saw on the radar screen how both half divisions approached the Scharnhorst and maneuvered into a torpedo launch position.

By 18:40, the first half-division (Savage and Samarets) was behind the stern of the Scharnhorst, approaching from the southeast direction about ten thousand yards to the German battleship. Scharnhorst opened heavy fire on them with auxiliary caliber artillery and anti-aircraft guns. The destroyers fired back, simultaneously bombarding the Scharnhorst with illuminating shells.

At the same time, the second half-division ("Scorpio" and "Stord") launched a torpedo attack. The Scorpion fired eight torpedoes at two thousand one hundred yards, and the Stord another eight at eighteen hundred. From the Scorpion, one torpedo hit was observed.

Dodging torpedoes, Scharnhorst turned south, continuing to fire on the second division, which was in full swing out of the attack. With this maneuver, the battleship placed itself under the torpedo tubes of the first division. Thus, while Savage and Samarets were withdrawing, Scorpion and Stord, quickly deploying torpedo tubes from port to starboard, rushed to the attack. The Savage fired eight torpedoes at three thousand five hundred yards. The Samarts had only one quad launcher active because of the damage it had sustained, and under heavy fire the destroyer was only able to fire four torpedoes from eighteen hundred yards. "Savage" miraculously avoided hits, but "Samarets" received damage above the waterline and had losses in personnel. One shell from the Scharnhorst hit the rangefinder post but did not explode. Splinters from other shells disabled one vehicle, reducing the destroyer's speed to ten knots. An officer and ten sailors were killed and eleven sailors were wounded. Savage observed one hit on the Scharnhorst. One hit was also observed by Samarets. The torpedo attack of the two half-battalions of destroyers was carried out without any support from the battleship Duke of York or the cruiser Jamaica. The Duke of York spotted three heavy underwater explosions on the Scharnhorst. On the cruiser Belfast, six such explosions were recorded. In fact, only one torpedo hit the Scharnhorst. Almost simultaneously leaving the attack, the British destroyers quickly began to withdraw to the north.

VIII

While the guns of the Scharnhorst, firing quickly, fought off the English destroyers, Chief Petty Officer Gedde heard a report from the stern radar post, announcing the appearance of new targets. Distances and bearings were given. Soon, the Scharnhorst's main battery guns opened fire on vague shadows looming in the darkness, one of which was identified as a ship of the line.

The sea around the Scharnhorst boiled with heavy shells. The second artilleryman, Captain Lieutenant Whiting, ordered the secondary caliber guns to fire on the enemy battleship, as well as on another ship, which, judging by the bursts of its shells, was obviously a cruiser. English shells began to methodically crush the Scharnhorst. One after another, heavy explosions rocked the ship from keel to fin. Steel crushed steel. Fires broke out. Toxic smoke, mixed with powder gases and gases from explosions of British shells, suffocated people in the cramped armored compartments. The two surviving three-gun turrets of the main caliber continued to fire furiously. Rapid fire on the enemy was carried out by 150 mm guns and 105 mm anti-aircraft guns. Fireworks of lighting flashes continued to rage over the battleship, explosions thundered from British shells and torpedoes, fragments flying in all directions rang against the armor. Columns of icy water from explosions among the foaming shafts fell on the deck and superstructures. This hurricane of fire and water lasted from 19:01 to 19:37. In the incredible roar of battle, only well-trained signalmen could still distinguish the voices and messages transmitted over the Scharnhorst's combat broadcast.

Chief Sergeant Gedde was one of those people. Staring into the eyepieces, he raised his head and looked back only when a particularly heavy explosion shook the ship. Through the infernal noise, he heard the words of the commander, said on the broadcast: "Scharnhorst is always ahead!" This was the motto of the ship. Gedde clenched his teeth and looked around. The Scharnhorst was literally bombarded with shells. Wood, iron and steel fragments flew in all directions after deafening explosions. It seemed that the ship was being torn apart by some giant fiery plowshare. The elastic wave of the next explosion tore Gedde away from the binocular and threw him onto the floor with such force that the chief foreman lost consciousness. When he hardly opened his eyes again, he saw the commander. The captain of the first rank, Ginze, left the conning tower through the port side door in order to look around and better understand the situation prevailing on the ship. All optical equipment in the conning tower was partially destroyed by shrapnel, partially disabled. When the commander of the Scharnhorst squeezed out through the half-open armored door, a 14-inch shell that stunned Chief Gedde hit the bow of the Scharnhorst. Small fragments struck the first-rank captain Ginze in the face, but he barely noticed it. He only felt something warm run down his forehead and cheeks, and wiped himself off with a handkerchief. Then the commander saw Gedde lying unconscious on the floor of the signal platform, and bent over him:

Are you hurt, Hedde?

Exactly the same question the commander of the ship asked the chief foreman two hours ago. The commander helped the signalman to his feet. Gedde rubbed his eyes and glanced at his equipment. She was whole.

"I am not wounded, sir captain of the first rank. I was stunned again. The equipment is intact.

The commander nodded.

- Fine. Look what happened to the starboard signalmen. They don't answer.

With these words, the commander again retired to the conning tower, and Gedde hurried to the starboard side, where the signal watch was located. In the crimson glow of the illuminating shells, Gedde saw that all the equipment on the starboard side was destroyed, and the signalmen were killed. Torn cables coiled like snakes in the wind among the unidentifiable remains of human bodies and twisted metal structures.

Returning at a run to his post, Gedde immediately reported by telephone:

- The forward signal post on the starboard side is completely destroyed. All died.

At about 19:25, Gedde felt another torpedo hit the battleship, which practically brought the ship to a halt. Then a medium-caliber shell fired by one of the English cruisers, which were now both north and south of the Scharnhorst, hit the bow of the battleship. Fragments of this projectile destroyed Gedde's optical and telephone equipment. He didn't get a scratch himself.

While Gedde was determining the damage, some foreman, sent by the commander, came running from the conning tower.

"The commander wants to know what happened here," the foreman shouted. "Why don't you answer?"

"Everything is broken," said Gedde, pointing to the mangled remnants of his equipment.

The foreman disappeared in the conning tower, but immediately reappeared:

— The commander ordered you to go to the conning tower. The old man says that being at your post no longer makes any sense.

Leaving his broken post, Gedde squeezed into the conning tower.

Here, virtually without interruption, reports flocked from all the combat posts of the battleship. In the light of the gun flares of the main caliber "B" turret, which momentarily illuminated the dim darkness of the conning tower, Chief Petty Officer Gedde saw the tall figure of senior officer Captain Second Rank Dominic, who was reporting something to the commander. Gedde also recognized the massive, broad-shouldered figure of Rear Admiral Bey, leaning against the starboard bulkhead. The narrow viewing slots of the conning tower were covered with armored covers, and observation was carried out through three periscopes equipped with excellent Bremen Atlas optics.

In the darkness, Gedde heard the voice of a senior mechanical engineer reporting to the commander via the intra-ship communication system about the failure of the third machine due to an accident in the steam supply system. The engineer hoped to repair the damage in twenty minutes, perhaps half an hour. And indeed, twenty minutes later they reported from the car:

"The ship can go again at twenty knots.

- Fine, car! - the commander answered. - Thank you for the excellent work!

The commander made a sign to the watch officer, the engine telegraph rang, and the Scharnhorst, which stood almost motionless, rushed forward. Rear Admiral Bey approached the commander, and Chief Petty Officer Gedde saw the admiral, the commander, and the first mate exchange glances.

Finally, the admiral made a gesture with his hand towards the starboard side:

"Turn north, Ginze. Perhaps we will be able to get out of this hell in

north direction.

It was about 19:20 when the admiral gave this order to the commander of the ship, which was gaining speed.

The Scharnhorst began to turn from a westerly course to the north when Gedde saw that Lieutenant Bosse, the commander of the mine-torpedo warhead, appeared in the wheelhouse. Gedde knew from earlier overheard conversations that the captain of the first rank Ginze took into account the possibility of using torpedoes in this battle. Having saluted the commander, Bosse reported that the entire torpedo equipment of the ship was destroyed or damaged by direct hits of enemy shells, although he hopes that something else can be repaired. He is examining everything now with his miners and will report to the conning tower.

- All right, Bosse, - the commander answered. - But do nothing without my knowledge. Wait for the order. Please try to get your equipment up and running as soon as possible.

"Yes, Mr. Captain of the First Rank," replied Bosse, and, leaving the wheelhouse through the left door, he quickly began to descend the ladder to the upper deck.

The telephone buzzer crackled again. This time the call was from a senior officer who managed to return to his combat post. Second-Class Captain Dominik reported that the forward first aid station and dressing room had been destroyed. The ship's doctor, chaplain and all medical personnel perished. It was strange, since the first aid station was located deep below the upper deck ...

And in the tower of the auxiliary caliber No. IV on the left side of the battleship, silence and calm still reigned. Only 150-mm starboard guns and two main battery turrets, "B" and "C", fired. Sailor Straeter and his fellow gunners, realizing the horror of the situation in which their ship found itself, were eager to take part in the battle, but for now all they had to do was listen to the reports coming from other artillery towers. The starboard 150-millimeter turret No. II reported that after the hit, the aiming system of the guns was broken. A few minutes later, the same tower transmitted a report that it had been disabled by a new hit. Hearing the commander's words: "Scharnhorst is always ahead!" The gunners looked at each other. Some even smiled as everyone was proud of their ship's motto. But after a few seconds, the smiles disappeared from their faces. The Scharnhorst received such a terrible blow that the battleship's hull gnashed and vibrated along its entire length. Emergency light bulbs knocked out of their sockets. They had not yet been replaced, when the ship was thrown up by another terrible explosion. The broadcast was silent.

"We've been hit by a torpedo," Sergeant Moritz said confidently.

Maybe.

Everyone sat silently in their seats. Finally, the broadcast came to life, transmitting the order to flood the combat cellars of the tower of the main caliber "B".

The commanders listened to this message, numb with horror. So tower "B" is also out of action? Tower "A" has been silent for a long time. She remained jammed from the very beginning of the battle. Is it now the turn of the tower "B"? But then they heard that the tower "B" resumed firing at, and breathed a sigh of relief ...

And in the tower "B" the following happened. The commander who was there, senior sailor Birkle, heard from the foreman of the tower that the tower "A" located below them received another hit, which caused a strong explosion in the turret reloading compartment. Clubs of suffocating smoke enveloped tower "B", and red-hot fragments pierced the bulkheads separating the cellars of tower "A" from the cellars of tower "B". The tower commander immediately gave

order to flood the cellars. A quarter of an hour later they were drained, and the tower resumed fire.

In the 150mm No. IV turret, the consequences of this, perhaps erroneous decision, were still being discussed when the Scharnhorst was shaken by another powerful explosion. "Direct hit in the aircraft hangar," the battle broadcast announced. "A strong fire. The personnel of the aviation combat unit is fighting fire." Turret No. IV was a deck below the hangar, but even in it they felt the heat caused by the fire that had begun. They could hear the orders of officers and non-commissioned officers who led the fight against fire. Meanwhile, the voice of the commander was heard over the broadcast, announcing that the battleship was again moving at a speed of twenty knots. But the battery of guns of the auxiliary caliber of the left side was still inactive, not having fired a single shot. Locked in a cramped tower, the gunners listened to every sound, to every shot, trying to imagine a picture of the ongoing battle. They noticed how the Scharnhorst was gradually increasing its speed, felt that the battleship began to roll, which they associated with a change in course, and when the pitching changed to side, they correctly understood that the ship had turned north. Finally, from Lieutenant Commander Whiting, they received the long-awaited order to open fire. From the forward fire control post, a command followed to tower No. IV: "Target: flashes of enemy guns to the left of the nose."

Then accurate bearing, distance and lateral correction data were transmitted to the tower. Chief Petty Officer Moritz, turning the turret around, ordered:

- The interval between volleys is six seconds. Fire!

Only Moritz and conductor Wibbelshof could see the enemy through their periscopes. The rest, as they say, worked blindly. Drenched in sweat, the gunners were straining at the guns, maintaining the set rate of fire.

"105-mm anti-aircraft guns begin firing illuminating shells," the combat broadcast announced, trying to shout over the roar of the battle.

Shortly thereafter, a message was transmitted from the tower of the main caliber "B":

"There are only three shells per gun left."

A little later, tower "C" reported that they had completely run out of ammunition. Meanwhile, the gunners of the 105-millimeter turret No. IV were now working like mad: they were moving trays with shells to the breech of the guns, loading, closing the locks, firing, opening the locks, catching the smoking copper shells of the charges, throwing them through a special slot into the sump deck below, again guns were loaded and fired.

"Order to C Tower," barked the combat broadcast. "Start reloading ammunition from the cellars of tower 'A'."

And a minute later it sounded:

"The commander turns to the commanders of the auxiliary caliber artillery: all hope is now on you. The main caliber guns have exhausted their ammunition!"

But at this time, the third artillery officer, Lieutenant Commander Fugaer, reported to the senior artilleryman that he had resumed fire control of turret C from the aft artillery post, where the reloading of ammunition from the cellars of turret A had begun. A few minutes later, the "C" turret, which had ceased fire due to the lack of shells, again roared with its three 380-millimeter guns. Their roar was accompanied by the staccato bark of 150 millimeters. According to the combat broadcast, the commander sent a radiogram to the command of the Kriegsmarine in Berlin, stating that the Scharnhorst would fight to the last shell. This meant that the end was not far off.

By this time, at least three torpedoes had already hit the Scharnhorst, and it began to slowly roll to starboard. Then two or three torpedoes exploded in the bow of the ship on the starboard side, increasing the roll.

Simultaneously with their explosions, the combat broadcast transmitted the order of the commander:

"Attention all combat posts! Destroy all secret documents and equipment. Damage control division to prepare the ship for sinking.

The explosions on the ship were already thundering without ceasing. From the upper tier of the bow superstructure, a 20-millimeter anti-aircraft gun continued to hit the enemy. The 150-mm turret No. IV continued to fire, until, due to a strong roll, the elevator for supplying shells to the guns jammed.

Just at that moment, an order came from the bridge:

"LEAVE THE SHIP!"

Conductor Wibbelshof rose from his seat and ordered:

Leave the tower!

The commanders hesitated. During the entire battle, there was no damage or casualties in the tower.

"Save yourselves, boys," Wibbelshof repeated, raising his voice. "But I'm staying here."

Chief Petty Officer Moritz stood next to his commander:

- I'm staying too.

Nobody else said a word. Uncertainly climbing one after another, the gunners began to get out of the tower. The sailor Straeter, who was one of the last to leave, saw how the conductor Wibbelshof, sitting down again in his place, pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and lit a cigarette. Chief Petty Officer Moritz also sank into his seat.

This picture was imprinted in the memory of the sailor Shtrater for the rest of his life and arose before his eyes whenever he began to think or talk about his ship.

Even before the first torpedoes hit the Scharnhorst at this stage of the battle, Chief Petty Officer Gedde, now in the conning tower, heard a report that enemy destroyers were approaching the Scharnhorst from the stern.

Having received this report, the commander said to the admiral:

"They want to end us like they did the Bismarck." Hit the rudder and propellers with torpedoes!

Through an emergency communication line, Captain First Rank Ginze ordered Ober Lieutenant Bosse to fire torpedoes at enemy ships.

The commander knew that Bosse and his people, at the cost of superhuman efforts, had put the torpedo tubes into operation, and now fired the entire supply of torpedoes, first from the port and then from the starboard side, at the targets that Ginze pointed out to them from the conning tower.

After some time, the signalman reported that he had seen a bright flash of an explosion behind the stern of the Scharnhorst. What kind of flash it was, so no one knew.

Chief Sergeant Gedde heard reports coming from all the combat posts of the dying

ship. Fulfilling the order of the commander, the demolition men set charges in various compartments of the battleship, while secret documents and devices were destroyed.

The Scharnhorst was listing more and more to starboard. The commander called the navigator to him.

'Give the Combat Information Center,' he ordered, 'the latest data on our location in clear text.' Hurry, Lanz. Try to be on time. Time is running out.

Then the commander gave a command over the combat broadcast: "The commander is speaking. Leave the ship! All up! Wear life jackets! Get ready to jump overboard!"

Captain of the second rank Dominic, called by the commander, appeared in the wheelhouse. The admiral, the commander and the first mate discussed the measures that still need to be taken in connection with the abandonment of the ship. Gedde saw the tall figure of the senior officer leaving the conning tower and descending the port side ladder to the upper deck.

The list continued to increase, and the captain of the first rank Ginze began to convince everyone in the conning tower to leave it. There were about twenty-five people in the cabin. Most of them refused to leave the cabin without a commander. One of the young sailors shook his head and simply said:

We are staying with you.

Another sailor stated that he did not have a life jacket, and therefore he also remained. The commander took off his life jacket and handed it to the sailor.

- Take it and leave. Don't worry about me - I'm a great swimmer. Come on guys, hurry up. I will follow you.

Through the joint efforts of the commander and the admiral, they eventually managed to induce everyone to leave the conning tower, after which Rear Admiral Bey and Captain First Rank Ginze climbed onto the tilted navigation bridge. Coming out onto the wing of the bridge, the battleship commander silently looked at the upper deck, which was more and more filled with people, as if pouring out onto the deck from all the hatches, manholes and necks. They gathered in groups, waiting for something. They were talking and shouting, but nothing could be heard because of the roar of the sea and the wind, the continued explosions and the loud whistle of steam escaping from the pipelines. The whole picture was illuminated by the crimson flicker of the illuminating shells that continued to burst over the Scharnhorst. The dead and dying lay among the living on deck, but there was no sign of panic.

The captain of the first rank Ginze, armed with a megaphone, urged the sailors not to jump from the tilted starboard side, but to move to the port side and slide down it into the sea. It is not known if anyone heard the commander's last instructions...

Chief Petty Officer Gedde saw how Senior Artilleryman Captain 3rd Rank Bredenbroeker and Second Artilleryman Captain Lieutenant Witing left the Central Fire Control Post on the wing of the bridge where the commander was. They approached the commander, exchanged a few words with him and hurried down, descending the port ladder to the upper deck.

- Go overboard! shouted Captain Ginze through a megaphone. "Don't forget to inflate your life jackets!"

The figure of a senior officer towered over the crowds, trying to help almost everyone personally.

Gedde suddenly realized that it was time for him to leave the bridge. Shrouded in smoke, tilted

The Scharnhorst rose on the stormy waves, continuing to move at low speed. Its starboard side was already almost in the water, the wing of the bridge touched the tops of the waves that licked the foremast. Lighting shells were still bursting over the dying ship and snowstorms, mixed with hail, were howling.

Gedde realized that the battleship could capsize at any second. Next to him on the bridge, he suddenly found another signalman - foreman Dyerling. Sailors helped each other to put on and inflate life jackets, fasten and adjust properly

straps.

With difficulty descending the ladder and balancing on an almost vertical deck, the signalers tried to get to the rails of the port side. The oncoming wave washed them off the deck, separated them and carried them overboard. Gedde was sucked in by the whirlpool that formed against the ship's hull. He felt a terrible pressure on his eardrums, but before he could do anything, he was carried to the surface, where the waves threw him up and spun, threatening to crush him against the armor of the sinking Scharnhorst.

The chief foreman was making desperate efforts to sail away from the battleship plunging into the abyss. Suddenly, he saw in front of him a buoy-diverter of a trawl, on which a sailor was sitting astride. Gedde swam to the buoy, the sailor tried to help him climb, but the buoy turned over, and both were in the water. Having surfaced, Gedde noticed many empty copper cases from powder charges of 280-mm shells from the Scharnhorst, jumping on the waves. The signalman swam towards one of them, but when he tried to grab onto the copper surface of the case, it escaped from his hands, filled with water and sank. Luckily, Gedde stumbled upon a wooden deck grating that had been washed off the bridge and grabbed hold of it. He wanted to use the grate as a raft, but with such a wave it was impossible to do so.

Lighting shells continued to burst in the sky, and British searchlights fumbled across the surface of the sea. Tossed by a wave, Gedde saw the Scharnhorst lying on the starboard side. The spectacle seemed to him completely unreal and fantastic. The professional thought of the signalman noted that like this, "in plan", the battleship could only be seen from the height of an aircraft flying above it.

At the starboard side of the battleship, only a dozen or three people sailed. Most followed the commander's advice and left the Scharnhorst on the port side. Later, Gedde thanked Providence more than once that he was washed into the water right from the starboard side, since almost everyone who managed to escape was picked up precisely from the starboard side of the sunken battleship.

Fighting the waves, Gedde saw the signal light of a life raft flashing in the darkness very close to him. On the raft were a young officer and several sailors. Having sailed closer, Gedde heard the words of an old sea song: "Flowers do not grow on the graves of sailors ..." He still cannot say for sure whether the sailors on the raft really sang this song or it sounded in his head. But then he quite clearly heard someone screaming:

"The commander is here!" He floats near the ship! He won't last long without a life jacket!

Gedde knew that the commander was the last to leave the ship. Rather, he was the last one who still managed to leave the dying battleship.

Many, very many could not even get out on the upper deck: the crews of the battle cellars, stokers and machinists, as well as almost all those sailors whose combat posts were under the armored deck.

Again, through a snowstorm with hail, Gedde heard someone cry:

- Save the old man! He can no longer float!

Some sailor, sailing near Gedde, shouted something to him. He had to repeat this once or twice before Gedde got the meaning of the words said: "The commander and the first mate gave the life jackets to the sailors."

Gedde was now about two hundred meters from the Scharnhorst lying on the starboard side. The mouth of the chimney looked at him like the entrance to some terrible tunnel. The chief foreman was surprised that the ship was still floating on the water. Gedde even heard the dull hum of the turbines still working in the bowels of the battleship.

From the holes of the Scharnhorst, oil was whipping, covering the sea around him with a tight oily film, on top of which hundreds of heads danced on the waves. Fuel oil burned the face, corroded the eyes, caused attacks of terrible vomiting. Choking on fuel oil, dozens of people went to the bottom.

Fortunately, storm waves quickly absorbed and carried the fuel oil further.

At this very time, the senior sailor Strater saw how the Scharnhorst turned over and went under the water bow first. All three of its propellers were still working at high speed.

Gedde no longer tried to swim to the raft, which danced on the waves not far from him. There were already about twenty people on the raft, and even more held on to it, being in the water, almost drowning it. Seeing this, Gedde swam to the side, where wooden boards and logs floated, used in the fight for damage to fasten bulkheads and seal holes. A few minutes later, the chief foreman managed to grab hold of a log and rest a little, surrendering to the will of the waves. Glancing in the direction of the ship, Gedde saw that the Scharnhorst was still floating keel up, resembling a giant tortoise. On the bottom of the ship, Gedde noticed a lot of people, but more floated around him.

Meanwhile Gedde was already beginning to numb from the cold. He could not feel his legs and felt his whole body go numb. Small ice floes floated by, and snow and hail flew almost parallel to the sea surface due to strong winds.

Forces were leaving Gedde. He was no longer able to hold onto the log, stiffened by his hands, when, with a dimming consciousness, he saw the raft on which the foreman Ion Merkel and three others were. Merkel managed to get to the bottom of the battleship, from where he saw an empty raft. Throwing himself back into the water, he climbed onto this raft and helped three more do it. Gathering the last of his strength, Gedde managed to swim to the raft. He was already half paralyzed when Merkel pulled him onto the raft, and although Gedde's body was on the raft, his legs dangled helplessly into the water. Gedde still had the strength to turn his head towards the ship. Only the stern of the Scharnhorst stuck out of the water, rapidly sinking into the dark polar abyss.

Explosions of lighting shells gradually ceased, pitch darkness thickened over the site of the death of the battleship. Small groups of sailors on several rafts could hardly distinguish each other, and those who were in the water could not be seen at all. Sergeant Major Merkel helped another young sailor, who was forced to leave another raft due to its overload, climb onto the raft.

All those on the raft were already thinking poorly, could not move their arms or legs, stupidly waiting for the end. For about an hour and a half they were carried along the waves, overflowing the raft. Clinging closely and clinging to each other, they took off together with the raft on the crest of the wave, getting another ice bath, then fell down, where they were again covered by the wave. Hedde didn't understand why they weren't washed off the raft.

They were brought out of their general stupor by a gun flash that flashed very close by. A cannon fired from the pitch darkness, and the shells whistled over their heads. The first thought was that the fire was directed precisely at them. There was a dull sound of explosion in the dark sky, and the sea was lit up with a pink glow. They were flares. A minute later, blindingly white beams of searchlights cut through the darkness.

For some time, the exhausted people on the raft thought that they would be fired upon, but soon they were convinced of their mistake. A searchlight beam from some large ship illuminated the raft. Another lighting projectile exploded, and the sailors from the Scharnhorst saw two destroyers heading towards their raft. Then one of the destroyers turned aside, but the other, carefully maneuvering, approached the raft. Gedde, who regained full consciousness, noted with what skill, despite the stormy sea, the ship was brought to the raft.

The destroyer turned to starboard so that the wind immediately nailed the raft to it, after which the loading net was thrown overboard, and life lines were thrown onto the raft.

One by one, the German sailors were taken aboard the destroyer.

Hedde didn't have the strength to tie the end with a bow knot, or even to grasp it with numb fingers. Four times he broke off the end and fell back into the water. For the fifth time, the thrown end hit him right in the mouth. In desperation, the Chief Petty Officer clung to him with his teeth and thus was pulled up to the level of the deck. Then several strong hands caught Gedde by the collar of his robe and dragged him over the rail.

The ship turned out to be the English destroyer Scorpion. He picked up thirty sailors from the Scharnhorst from the water. Another six people were rescued by the destroyer Matchlis. These were all who managed to be saved from the crew of one thousand nine hundred and eighty-six people!

The English sailors treated the prisoners sympathetically, not to say cordially. The German sailors were immediately taken off their icy, oil-soaked uniforms, which were thrown overboard, changing them into dry, warm clothes. They were given a glass of rum each and fed hot food. The prisoners learned that the destroyer was heading to Murmansk as part of a convoy escort.

Senior sailor Strater with six other sailors was also removed from their raft by the destroyer Scorpion.

The next morning, December 27, the prisoners, one at a time, were interrogated by the senior officer of the Scorpion. They gave their names and titles. Senior in rank among the rescued was foreman Gedde. He was interrogated for the longest time, but he refused most of the questions.

reply.

In the afternoon of the same day, the Scorpion anchored in the roadstead of Murmansk. Half an hour later, the prisoners were ordered to line up on the upper deck, where they were given special jackets for prisoners of war. A Russian tugboat approached the destroyer, on which the prisoners, under the escort of British marines and Russian sailors, were sent somewhere. The Germans looked at each other anxiously. Don't the British hand them over to the Russians? Maybe it's better to jump overboard?

An English officer, who spoke German, noticed the anxiety that seized the captured sailors, and understood everything.

"Calm down," he said, "they won't hand you over to the Russians." The admiral ordered all the prisoners to be delivered from the Scharnhorst to the Duke of York. You will go to England on the flagship. Upon arrival at the Duke of York, four wounded German sailors were sent to the infirmary, and the rest to the cockpit, where the prisoners were supposed to be until they arrived at

England. The Marine Corps officer who escorted the prisoners appointed the Chief Petty Officer as the senior officer responsible for order and cleanliness in the cockpit. All requests and complaints were to be transmitted by the prisoners through an interpreter, who turned out to be a young medical officer from the medical unit of the ship. Somehow, during the next detour, the chief foreman managed to talk to him.

- May I know your opinion about the battle and the death of the Scharnhorst? Hedde asked the officer. "Could our ship have escaped destruction?"

"Although I shouldn't tell you this," the English officer answered after thinking, "but I will. Immediately after the battle, Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser gathered all the officers and said the following:

- Gentlemen, the battle with Scharnhorst ended in our victory. I hope that if any of you ever have to fight on your ship against a vastly superior enemy, you will command your ship as gallantly as the officers of the Scharnhorst did.

"I have nothing to add to the words of the admiral," continued the doctor from the Duke of York. And now I am instructed to inform you that tomorrow at 15:00 our admiral has expressed a desire to inspect those rescued from the Scharnhorst. Will you be able to prepare your people for the review by this time? As a senior in rank, you will have to build them and give the appropriate commands, as it should be in the German navy. New clothes will be given to you.

All German sailors were given civilian trousers, blue sweaters and slippers, as well as shaving accessories.

Shortly before 15:00 Gedde ordered the prisoners to line up.

Exactly at 15:00, a bugle sounded on the ship, and Admiral Fraser entered the cockpit, accompanied by his staff officers. Gedde gave the command "attention".

The British admiral stood in front of the formation of captured German sailors and raised his hand to the visor of his cap. All the officers accompanying him, including the commander of the battleship Duke of York, did the same, standing in salute for about a minute. Gedde realized that these honors were not given to them, but to their ship and its heroic death.

Then Admiral Fraser leisurely walked around all the lines of the prisoners (due to the closeness of the cockpit, the German sailors lined up in five lines), talking through an interpreter with virtually each of the captured sailors, asking questions about age, profession, place of residence, family, reasons that prompted them to serve in the Navy and so on.

Having completed his rounds, Admiral Fraser again appeared in front of the formation and said:

"We always pay tribute to the valor of enemies, even those who have been defeated. The British people as a whole do not hate you. Make no mistake about this when you are in England. Do what you're told and you'll be fine.

Gedda was deeply impressed by the solemnity of this event. The next day, everything happened again when the commander of the battleship Duke of York visited the prisoners. The ship's commander told Gedda that the admiral had ordered the prisoners to be treated like members of the crew of an English battleship, giving them all the comfort possible on a warship.

During the passage from Murmansk to Scapa Flow, the prisoners were allowed to walk and

play sports on the upper deck between two aircraft hangars. They were often photographed by journalists and English sailors present on board the battleship. Nominally, six marines guarded the prisoners, but it was more like a friendly conversation.

Walking along the English battleship, Chief Sergeant Gedde noticed in some places traces of fresh electric welding. Heading for a shower or latrine, Gedde passed through several compartments, where he also saw traces of the ship's recent battle scars. He could not stand it and asked the doctor-translator if the Duke of York received hits in the battle with the Scharnhorst.

"Of course I shouldn't have told you this," the medical officer replied. "But I'll tell you honestly: we didn't have a dry place on the battery and lower decks. Electric and manual pumps worked day and night. Does it satisfy you?"

As the Duke of York passed through the site of the sinking of the Scharnhorst, it was run over, fireworks were fired, and a large wreath was thrown into the sea. The prisoners were announced on the broadcast that a ceremony was taking place in honor of the valiant crew of the Scharnhorst, who died in battle.

For six days after the rescue, Gedde could not sleep. Sleeping pills, received from a doctor friend, did not help. Only when Gedde was driven from Scapa Flow in a decrepit sentry did he manage to get about three hours of sleep.

In London, all prisoners were separated from each other. Further questions followed, sending to transit camps. Eight were then sent to Canada and twenty-seven to the United States. Later, someone told Gedde that Senior Seaman Strather had been exchanged.

Chief Petty Officer Gedde could not figure out the origin of the rumor that Rear Admiral Bey and Captain First Rank Ginze had shot themselves on the bridge before the sinking of the ship. The fate of the admiral is really unknown, and it is possible that he did so. But the commander left the ship, he was seen in the water and kept afloat until he died of hypothermia.

They also tried to pull senior officer Dominic onto the English destroyer. He fell off the lifeline several times and eventually drowned.

In 1947 Chief Petty Officer Wilhelm Gedde was released from captivity and returned to Germany. Together with other survivors, as well as with officers and sailors who previously served on the Scharnhorst, with relatives and friends of the victims, he founded the Scharnhorst Memorial Society.

The society at various times was headed by the former commander of the Scharnhorst, captain of the first rank Hoffmann and the former navigator of the battleship Gissler, who commanded the cruiser Nuremberg at the end of the war.

Every year, members of the Society on a rented ship went to the place of the death of the Scharnhorst, threw wreaths into the water and served a memorial service for the dead. Gradually, the society united the memory of all the German sailors who died during the Second World War.

Since the mid-sixties, a number of English veteran organizations of this kind have joined the Scharnhorst Memorial Society, and since the early nineties, a number of Russian societies that honored the memory of Soviet sailors who died in the Arctic.

Time gradually erases the boundaries between enemies, making everyone equal in the face of

of death.

INSTEAD OF EPILOGUE

Chronicle of the battle.

19:01. The battleship Duke of York and the cruiser Jamaica opened fire. Range: 10,400 yards.

The cruiser Norfolk opened fire at the same time, but stopped it after two salvos due to the extremely poor visibility of the target.

Between 19:01 and 19:28, the Scharnhorst's speed was observed to drop from twenty knots to five knots.

19:15. The cruiser Belfast opened fire. Range: 17,000 yards.

19:25. The cruiser "Jamaica" fired three torpedoes at the "Scharnhorst" (to the port side). Distance: 3500 yards. One torpedo got stuck in the vehicle. No hits were observed. The torpedoes passed by, because the cruiser believed that the Scharnhorst was standing still, while she continued to move.

19:27. The cruiser Belfast fired three torpedoes at the starboard side of the Scharnhorst. The distance is not exactly determined, but apparently the same as that of the "Jamaica" - 3500 yards. One hit was reported from the cruiser, but British sources consider this unlikely. "Jamaica and Belfast turned around to fire torpedoes from the other side. At the same time, Jamaica fired artillery at the Scharnhorst.

19:28. Battleship "Duke of York" ceased fire.

19:31. The destroyers of the seventy-second half-division "Opportune" and "Virago" attacked the "Scharnhorst" with torpedoes. The Opportune fired four torpedoes at the starboard side of the Scharnhorst. Distance: 2100 yards. One hit reported.

19:33. The destroyers of the seventy-first half-division "Musketeer" and "Matchlis" attacked the "Scharnhorst" from the north. The Musketeer fired four torpedoes at the port side of the German battleship. Distance: 1000 yards. There were two, possibly three hits on the port side between the funnel and the foremast. The destroyer Matchlis, following the Musketeer, was unable to attack due to a steep wave and a hit that jammed the rotary mechanism of the torpedo tube. When the Matchlies turned to attack the Scharnhorst from the other side, the German battleship had already sunk, and the Matchlies set about rescuing the survivors.

19:33. The destroyer Opportun fired four more torpedoes at the Scharnhorst. Distance: 2400 yards. One hit reported.

19:34. The destroyer Virago from the seventy-second half-division fired seven torpedoes at the Scharnhorst. Two hits were observed. Distance: 2800 yards. On the way out, the Virago opened artillery fire on the Scharnhorst.

19:37. The cruiser Jamaica fired three torpedoes at the port side of the Scharnhorst. Distance: 3750 yards. Two hits were reported, which were not directly observed, but were recorded by underwater explosions. "Scharnhorst" at that moment stood practically without a move, shrouded in clouds of smoke.

19:48. The cruiser "Belfast" tried to launch a torpedo attack, but in place of the "Scharnhorst"

only debris floated.

From the side of the British, the battle was fought: a battleship, three cruisers and eight destroyers. The Duke of York withdrew to the north to prevent confusion in identifying the ships. Everyone who had the opportunity to see the Scharnhorst, a giant burning mass, from which a huge cloud of smoke rose. Neither the flares nor the searchlights of the British could penetrate this smoke. Thus, none of the British ships saw how the Scharnhorst sank. But everyone is sure that the Scharnhorst sank after the strongest underwater explosion, which was heard and recorded on British ships at 19:45.

The Jamaica, Matchless and Virago were the last ships from which the Scharnhorst was seen at 19:38. The cruiser "Belfast", which went on the attack at 19:48, did not see the "Scharnhorst" anymore. The place of death of "Scharnhorst" - 72 ° 16 'N. sh. and 28°41' E. d.

Then Jamaica went north to join the battleship Duke of York, while Belfast, Norfolk and most of the destroyers searched for survivors until 20:40.

During the search, the Scorpion reported that the German admiral and commander of the Scharnhorst had been seen in the water. Both were seriously injured. The commander died before he could be found. The admiral grabbed the lifeline, but fell off the end and drowned.

Not a single officer was among the rescued. The senior in rank turned out to be chief foreman Gedde.

It is interesting to note that the Scharnhorst, like the battleship Bismarck two years before it, could not be sunk with artillery fire alone.

A post-battle investigation states with certainty that the Scharnhorst was sunk by torpedoes. In total, fifty-six torpedoes were fired at him, of which fourteen to fifteen hit the target. But despite so many torpedoes hit, not to mention about two dozen 356-millimeter shells from the Duke of York, the Scharnhorst machines performed admirably to the very end.

Until the moment of flooding, the Scharnhorst was powered by all the power and there was light.

The senior mechanical engineer of the Scharnhorst, captain of the third rank Koenig, the senior electrical engineer von Glace, the commanders of the damage control groups, Captain Lieutenant Darr and Ober Lieutenant Timmer, did not leave their combat posts and died along with the ship.

During the long battle, Scharnhorst scored two direct hits on the Duke of York. Both 280-millimeter shells hit the legs of the three-legged foremast of the English battleship, but did not explode. In his report, Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser indicated that for an hour and a half the Duke of York was under accurate fire from the Scharnhorst.

Volleys often covered, shells exploded near the English battleship, fragments rang against the sides and superstructures, but there were no direct hits.

Later, Admiral Fraser became Commander-in-Chief of the British Pacific Fleet, taking part with the US Navy in the final operations against Japan.

Sir Bruce Fraser became Admiral of the Fleet in 1948 and served as First Lord of the Admiralty until 1951.

Sir Bruce Fraser died in London on February 12, 1981 at the age of ninety-three. His ashes were taken to the open sea aboard the British guided-missile destroyer Sheffield and scattered above the surface of the water.

APPLICATION

Tactical and technical data of the battleship "Scharnhorst"

Displacement: 37,902 tons

Main dimensions: 22 x 30 x 8.69m.

Speed: maximum: 30 knots.

Armament: Nine 280 mm (11")/54 guns in three triple turrets: two at the bow, one at the stern.

Twelve 150-mm (5.9") / 55 guns.

Fourteen 105-mm (4.1") / 65 twin anti-aircraft installations.

Sixteen 37mm anti-aircraft guns.

Eight 20-mm anti-aircraft guns.

Six 533mm torpedo tubes (2x3).

Three or four airborne aircraft.

Engine plant: Three-shaft power plant, Brown-Boveri gear turbines, twelve Wagner boilers, 165,000 hp. With.

Booking:

Main armor belt - 320 mm.

Towers - 356 mm.

Conning tower - 320 mm.

Deck - 50–105 mm.

Cruising range: 10,000 miles at 14 knots.

Crew: 1669 (1939), 1840 (1941), 1986 (1943).

Origin of name:

Scharnhorst, Gerhard Johann David, background (1755-1813) - Prussian general, reformer of the Prussian army after the defeat at Jena during the Napoleonic Wars.